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Allegiances

ThunderClan

Leader: Maplestar: light brown she-cat with amber eyes

Deputy: Stormshadow: black tom with brown eyes

Medicine Cat: Emberfur: tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

Warriors:

-Robinfeather: brown and white tom with dark brown eyes

-Strongheart: dark grey tom with dark eyes (senior warrior)

Apprentice: Falconpaw: grey-brown semi mottled tom with amber eyes

-Grasspelt: brown tabby she-cat with an unusual white patch above her hazel eyes.

-Stormfoot: reddish tom with amber eyes

-Swiftclaw: grey and white she-cat with orange eyes (senior warrior)

-Oakleaf: tom with colored patches and blue eyes (senior warrior)

Apprentice: Redpaw: red-brown tom with hazel eyes

-Muddypelt: brown tom with amber eyes

-Sandfur: fawn-colored tom with green eyes

Apprentice: Forestpaw: grey she-cat with green eyes

-Laceleaf: chinchilla-colored she-cat with dark grey-ish eyes

Apprentice: Tinypaw: smoky-colored she-cat with dark blue eyes

-Lavenderpelt: lavender-colored she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice: Beepaw: orange tabby tom with dark yellow eyes

-Weaselnose: chocolate colored tom with a long nose and light brown eyes

Queens:

-Littlerose: tortoiseshell with green eyes; mother to Scarkit, Darkkit, Duskkit, and Beaverkit

-Vinestripe: grey with blue eyes; mother to Moonkit, Sunkit, Fogkit, Bluekit, and Sparrowkit

-Raintail: blue-ish grey eyes with blue-grey fur; mother to Tulipkit and Iriskit

Elders:

-Littlestripe: black and white striped tom with brown eyes

-Windpelt: roan-colored she-cat with blue eyes

-Buttonweasel: strange, wall-eyed brown tom with a very pointy nose like a weasel

RiverClan

Leader: Creekstar: grey tom with brown eyes

Deputy: Mossyfoot: lilac she-cat with amber eyes

Medicine Cat: Rushingface: grey and white tom with amber eyes

Warriors:

-Blossomnose: cream tabby she-cat with brown eyes (senior warrior)

-Dapplepelt: cream spotted tom with brown eyes

-Haretail: brown she-cat with grey eyes and a rather short tail

Apprentice: Wormpaw: cream tom with brown eyes

-Oakclaw: grey tom with green eyes

-Piketail: greyish tabby tom with a rather short tail

Apprentice: Lizardpaw: grey she-cat with silver eyes

-Goldenriver: ginger she-cat with amber eyes

-Lynxwhisker: sandy tom with blue eyes

-Elmleaf: brown and white she-cat with blue eyes

Apprentice: Flightpaw

-Whitestripe: light grey tom with brown-grey stripes (senior warrior)

-Wolfheart: grey and white tom

Apprentice: Heronpaw: grey and white tom with amber eyes

-Bearclaw: large chocolate tom with amber eyes

Apprentice: Hickorypaw

Queens:

-Littlebreeze: small she-cat with emerald eyes

-Hollyberry: calico she-cat with brown eyes

Elders:

-Tangletoe: grey tabby tom with aqua eyes

WindClan

Leader: Dewstar: brown she-cat with amber eyes

Deputy: Spiritheart: black she-cat with white paws and green eyes

Apprentice: Runningpaw

Medicine Cat: Scorchpool: black she-cat with blue eyes

Warriors:

-Smokewhisker: grey tabby she-cat with blue eyes

-Oddfoot: brown tabby tom with grey eyes and a semi-lame foot

-Brightpelt: reddish tom with dark blue eyes

-Dustedfur: black she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentice: Finchpaw

-Rabbitfoot: furry brown she-cat with dark black eyes

-Brackenbelly: bengal tom with aqua eyes (senior warrior)

-Cloudfur: white she-cat with orange eyes

Apprentice: Smallpaw

-Greenstripe: grey tabby tom with green eyes

Apprentice: Oakpaw

-Foxclaw: reddish tom with yellow eyes

-Crowflight: black she-cat with blue eyes

-Owlwing: ginger tom with green eyes (senior warrior)

-Clawednose: scarred dark grey tom

-Nightshade: blackish-blue she-cat with amber eyes

-Ravenfrost: grey and white mottled tom with ice-blue eyes

Queens:

-Deertail: brown she-cat with amber eyes, mother to Doekit, Whitekit, and Clawkit

-Aspenshade: tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes, mother to Oakkit and Rosekit

Elders:

-Bramblefur: red she-cat with lilac eyes

-Rabietail: creamy white tom who foams at the mouth

ShadowClan

Leader: Timberstar: smoky tom with green eyes

Deputy: Nightfoot: dark tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Medicine Cat: Brokenleaf: calico she-cat with amber eyes

Warriors:

-Snakestrike: brown tabby tom with black eyes

Apprentice: Stonepaw

-Twilightshade: grey she-cat with orange eyes

-Shadowheart: dark tom with yellow eyes

-Ghostwhisker: white tom with amber eyes

Apprentice: Stillpaw

-Swampstep: brown and white tom with grey eyes

-Thistlefur: light brown she-cat with yellow eyes (senior warrior)

-Hacklefang: white tom with brown eyes (senior warrior)

-Redfur: dark red tom with orange eyes

Apprentice: Frogpaw

-Quietclaw: silvery tabby she-cat with hazel eyes (senior warrior)

-Runningspirit: grey tabby tom with brown eyes

-Redfoot: ginger tom with amber eyes (senior warrior)

Apprentice: Sagepaw

-Lightpool: light brown she-cat with blue eyes

Queens:

-Cherryblossom: brown and grey she-cat with brown eyes

-Wrenflower: tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes

Elders:

-Morningclaw: calico she-cat with yellow eyes

-Snuzzleberry: red/cream tortoiseshell she-cat with soft brown eyes

Cats outside of Clans

Willow: Sandy she-cat queen; loner who lives near Twolegplace

Chapter 1

Moonkit squirmed and wriggled in her nest. Her jaws parted in a huge yawn, but she couldn't sleep. One of her littermates, Sunkit, slept soundly beside her. Her rust-red fur was soft and well-groomed, and her furry chest rose and fell with rhythmic breaths. Moonkit sighed, grooming her own silver tabby fur, running her rough, sandpaper-like tongue down her paw.

Sunkit began to stir and sat up drowsily. She stared at Moonkit with sleepy green eyes.

"Why are you still up, Moonkit?" her sister murmured. Moonkit shrugged, looking away from her sister's soft green gaze.

"Couldn't sleep," she replied, settling back down in her nest, resting her head on her paws.

"Whatever you say," Sunkit whispered, drifting back off to sleep as she rolled over.

Moonkit looked around the dark nursery. She spotted one of her and Sunkit's other littermates, Fogkit, snoring softly beside their mother, Vinestripe, with Bluekit sleeping between them. Across the nursery, Littlerose and her kits, Scarkit, Duskkit, Darkkit, and Beaverkit, were sleeping soundly. On the other side of the den, Raintail, Tulipkit, and Iriskit slept. She and her littermates were the oldest kits in the nursery - the other kits had only just been born.

Moonkit jabbed a paw into Fogkit's side.

"Wha -?" Fogkit mumbled. He rolled over to stare at Moonkit.

"Why did you wake me up?" he demanded. He shook his head crossly, standing up. "Whatever. What do you want? Go and bother Bluekit!" He shook his brown and white tabby pelt. Then he sat back down, licking his paw and drawing it over his white-tipped ears. "Well?" He stared at her expectantly.

"Er..." Moonkit began, shifting uncomfortably under her brother's stern brown gaze. She looked around, making sure no other cats were awake. She leaned in closer to Fogkit. "Let's go explore," she finally whispered. Fogkit stared at her in horror.

"But - but we're only kits!" He gasped. "We could get in serious trouble!"

Moonkit rolled her eyes and smiled mischievously.

"Scared?" she challenged.

"No!"

"Shh!" Moonkit gazed around the nursery, breathing a sigh of relief when she realized no cat had awoken. But her sharp eyes missed the emerald gream gleam of her sisters eyes. Bluekit was watching.

"Okay. Moonkit, I think you're crazy, but I'll go."

Moonkit gave a delighted squeal. "Yay!" Her ice-blue eyes gleamed. "Okay. Come on, follow me." She led the way out of the nursery. Peering around, she checked if the coast was clear. She looked back at Fogkit and gave a tiny nod. With a flick of her tail, they bounded off toward the back entrance and pushed through the bramble barrier.

"What if we get caught?" Fogkit whispered beside her. Moonkit shook her head.

"We won't."

"You sure?"

"Well... just come on. Follow me, scaredy-kit."

Moonkit marched into the trees. A bird fluttered out of a tree somewhere, squawking out a cry of alarm. Fogkit's fur bristled and he looked around nervously.

"What - what if StarClan gets mad that we left camp before we are apprenticed?" Fogkit stammered.

"You think StarClan cares?" Moonkit huffed. Fogkit's eyes stretched wide.

"Yes! I *do* think they care! I'll bet Sparrowkit is looking down at us right now, and I'll bet he's mad!" Fogkit sat down and stared at the stars, the cool breeze ruffling his fur. "I'll bet he misses us." He shook his head sadly. "I know *I* miss him." Moonkit trotted over and sat beside him.

"Me too." She rested her head on Fogkit's shoulder, ears twitching. "But he's probably happier in StarClan now. Of course, I wish he never died so young... But he was never strong enough. Vinestripe couldn't save him. But you, me, Sunkit and Bluekit are still here. They always said we were a big litter anyway."

"I guess." He turned to look at Moonkit. "Thanks, Moonkit."

"Of course, stupid furball!" She nudged him playfully. "Don't dwell on the past. Look at the future. We'll be apprentices soon, and then *warriors!"* Her eyes gleamed with happiness. "But hey. We should probably get back before Sunkit, Bluekit, or Vinestripe wake up."

Fogkit nodded. "Good idea." They walked side by side back to camp and pushed through the thorn barrier leading into the back of the clearing. They quietly nosed their way into the nursery and settled down together. Moonkit rested her head on her brother's back. This time she found it much easier to drift to sleep.

Chapter 2

"Where have you two been?" Sunkit hissed, her green eyes glinting maliciously.

"Exploring," replied Moonkit nonchalantly. "Come on, Sunkit... Since when have you ever minded a little bit of rule-breaking?"

Sunkit puffed herself up importantly. "Normally, I haven't," she replied, "but we're nearly apprentices. You should both start growing up." She scowled and stretched.

"Maybe she's right," squeaked Fogkit.

Moonkit rolled her eyes. "Furbrain," she muttered.

"We're going to be apprentices," mentioned Fogkit, trying to change the subject.

Sunkit sighed and smiled. "Yes," she answered. "We'll be able to hunt and have our first taste of fresh-kill caught by ourselves! And the ceremony is tonight! Life will be so different."

"Yes, yes... And mind Vinestripe and Robinfeather or Bluekit don't hear about our exploration," meowed Moonkit.

"Fine," mewed Sunkit, flicking her tail. "As long as you don't make a fool of yourselves. The ceremony is at sundown. It won't be long now before then. You *know,* Moonkit," she paused suddenly, and her sister stopped snickering, "Maplestar doesn't have to make you an apprentice if she doesn't find you worthy enough."

"Right," acknowledged Moonkit quietly.

It seemed like forever until at sundown Maplestar's voice sounded from the Highrock, calling everyone to a Clan meeting. Vinestripe entered the nursery in order to escort her kits to the rock. They bounced with excitement.

"Now, kits," their mother began, "be on your best behavior. An apprentice ceremony happens once in your lifetime."

The kits nodded, rolling their eyes.

"We know," Moonkit muttered. Vinestripe looked pleased enough, although the displeasure in her kits' eyes was evident.

"Right. Now you must look presentable!" She bent down and covered her kits with furious licks, picking them up by their scruffs when they tried to squirm away. Finally, she stopped and looked down lovingly at them. "All good," she murmured.

"About time!" Bluekit squealed. "My fur feels all spiky and hard!" she complained. Vinestripe ignored her.

"Oh! There's your father coming now," she meowed, nodding towards a brown and white tom walking towards them. "Robinfeather!" she called. He bounded up to her.

"The kits look ready if that's what you were going to ask," he remarked smugly after nosing the kits each in turn. He nodded towards them. "I'm so proud of you four! *Wow*! Apprentices!"

"Yep," they grinned in unison.

"I'm so excited!" Fogkit squeaked. "Real apprentices!"

"Well, yea. I'm excited, but at least I'm not obsessed," Sunkit muttered, giving her brother's ear a quick lick. "Of course this day would come!"

Moonkit nodded vigorously. "Yep. Today's the day."

Vinestripe nudged them to their paws. "And now's the time," she murmured. "Get off your lazy rumps and go find a seat in the front of the crowd."

"Okay!" Sunkit, Bluekit, and Fogkit scrambled to find open spots to sit, but Moonkit stayed behind, listening to her parents' talk.

"Think they're ready?" Vinestripe was murmuring into

Robinfeather's ear.

"Of course!" he huffed. "They've been ready since the day they were born."

"But Moonkit..."

"Come *on*, Moonkit! The meeting's starting!" Her littermates dragged her off before she caught the rest. She glanced back once more and caught the word "disorder". Then Vinestripe and Robinfeather broke away, settling down near other warriors.

The crowd was covered in the orange-pink light of the setting sun. The grass swayed toward the warriors' and apprentices' dens, which were two dens - the bigger one housed the warriors, while the smaller one was where the apprentices slept. The elders' den was a now hollowed-out branch that had fallen many seasons ago, which was near the entrance of the camp. On the other side of the camp was the medicine cat's den, where Emberfur, their medicine cat, slept and worked.

Beepaw the orange tabby tom and Forestpaw the grey she-cat bounded out of their den with Redpaw and Tinypaw. The warriors Strongheart and Oakleaf made their way to the Highrock with the elders Littlestripe and Windpelt.

"It's time," squeaked Moonkit. The four kits took their seats in front of the crowd closest to the Highrock, where Maplestar, a light brown she-cat, stood on top.

"Welcome, all," she purred. "Today we welcome four kits into apprenticeship."

Fogkit held his breath, seemingly unable to contain his excitement as Maplestar beckoned him to stand next to her. Fogkit's gaze drifted to his sisters, who evidently felt the same way.

"I say this before StarClan - you, Fogkit, will be known as Fogpaw."

Fogkit beamed as Maplestar looked at him.

"Your mentor will be Grasspelt," she finished, beckoning Grasspelt

onto the Highrock with a flick of her tail. Grasspelt touched noses with her new apprentice. "StarClan honors your fast thinking and courage, and I hope you will pass your knowledge onto Fogpaw." She then turned to Moonkit.

"You will be known as Moonpaw. Your mentor will be Swiftclaw." Swiftclaw padded up to her new apprentice. "Swiftclaw, StarClan honors your incredible ability to hunt, never missing your prey. Please pass this down to Moonpaw." Both of them touches noses.

She turned to Bluekit. "You will be known as Bluepaw," she announced. "Your mentor will be Muddypelt.

"Muddypelt, StarClan admires your quick thinking and cleverness. We hope you will pass down these qualities to Bluepaw."

"And you," she turned to Sunkit, "Will be known as Sunpaw. Your mentor will be Stormfoot.

"Stormfoot," she mewed as the orange-red tom padded over to his new apprentice, "StarClan honors your loyalty and ability to think logically. We expect you to pass this down to Sunpaw."

The four new apprentices sat on the Highrock, their eyes sparkling with joy as their Clanmates cheered their names.

"Sunpaw! Moonpaw! Fogpaw! Bluepaw!" they chanted. Maplestar re-addressed her Clan.

"This Clan meeting is over," she announced, leaping down from the Highrock. Moonkit began to follow her littermates to their new den, but Maplestar stopped her.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

Moonpaw's pelt tingled with anxiety as to why Maplestar had stopped her, but she dipped her head in respect.

"Yes. The apprentices' den," she mewed politely. Maplestar nodded, looking thoughtful. "Alright. Catch up with your siblings, then find Swiftclaw. She'll be waiting." She padded up to her den, pushing through the vines leading into her cave and vanished.

Moonpaw raced to the apprentices' den, finding her littermates already setting up their new moss nests. Sunpaw looked up.

"Where have you been?" she mumbled through a mouthful of moss and feathers. She spat them out and patted them down into her nest.

"Talking with Maplestar," Moonpaw replied, placing her own nest between her littermates. She copied their movements, taking mouthfuls of bedding and spitting it back out onto the nest and patting them down.

"Why?" Fogpaw asked. He sat in his new nest, now grooming himself.

"She wanted me to see Swiftclaw. Speaking of which, I should probably go find her now. Bye!" She quickly left the den in search of Swiftclaw, finding her by the fresh-kill pile, now well-stocked since the hunting patrols had just returned. Prey was plentiful in Greenleaf, and StarClan was good to them. No one went hungry.

"Swiftclaw!" she called, running up to her. She dropped the mouse she was eating at looked at her apprentice.

"Oh, hi, Moonpaw. Ready to start with apprentice work?"

"Yes, please!"

"Alright. We can go on a tour of our territory tomorrow so you can get familiar with everything."

Moonpaw bounced around in excitement. "I'm leaving the ca-amp," she chanted. "I'm leaving the-" Swiftclaw lashed her tail over Moonpaw's mouth.

"Shhh! You're not a kit anymore, Moonpaw! So you better grow up in the next six moons or you'll never be a warrior!" Moonpaw sat down, staring at her paws in shame.

"You're right. Sorry, Swiftclaw, it won't happen again."

"See to it that it won't," her mentor snorted. "Now go get some

sleep. We leave at sunhigh so we can get around the whole territory." She stalked off towards the warriors' den.

Moonpaw picked a mouse from the fresh-kill pile and quickly gulped it down. She then trotted off towards her own den. *Tomorrow,* she thought*, I'll begin the life of a* real *apprentice!*

Chapter 3

Moonpaw hurried back to the den. Now there were eight nests, one for each of the apprentices. Moonpaw walked over to hers.

"Pretty quick talk," Sunpaw observed, kneading her nest to make it more comfortable. "Too bad we can't sleep in tomorrow."

"One of the things I miss," Redpaw put in. "Being a kit and being able to sleep in as long as you want. But there are plenty of benefits to being an apprentice. We're officially Clan-members, you could say."

"We always have been," remarked Forestpaw. "Just never an *important* part." She laid down in her nest and her ears twitched. "We've got a long day ahead of us. We've got training to do."

The other apprentices settled down as well. Sunpaw snuggled up in the mossy warmth of the nest that was so different from the ones in the nursery, which was mostly soft moss and bird down. But she was comfortable. She tucked her face into her belly and yawned. Her nest was just left of the entrance to the den, so she saw a part of the now half-full moon as she slowly fell asleep.

* * *

"Sunpaw. *Sunpaw.* Get up!"

"Go away," Sunpaw muttered.

"Get *up,* you lazy lump!"

Sunpaw looked up and blinked her eyes. The smirking face of Stormfoot peeked into the den. He was reddish-colored, a bit like Sunpaw, with amber eyes.

"Oh! Of course!" Sunpaw stood up straight, feeling stupid, and quickly groomed some stray hairs into place.

"Better," meowed Stormfoot approvingly. "Now come on. I'll show you the borders of territory today. That's the most important."

"Okay," answered Sunpaw. It wasn't the most exciting thing to learn, but she would finally be able to venture out of camp - and maybe, once she had the basics down, she'd get to patrol with real warriors.

Stormfoot led her out of camp and out into the dense, mossy forest. The sun was rising, casting its usual orangey glow over the ground. Birds twittered in the trees and Sunpaw heard small animals running through the bushes. *Too bad I don't know how to hunt yet,* she thought.

But then again, maybe Stormfoot would teach her today and she could catch her own prey.

They walked and walked for what seemed like forever until they reached a part of the forest where a different type of tree lined the edge of ThunderClan territory. Stormfoot showed her how to mark her scent by rubbing against the trees. They walked along that border until they came to a thick river.

"This is an important boundary," answered Stormfoot. "We only get a portion of this river, since we hunt primarily on land. The rest, including the land on the other side, belongs to RiverClan. Do not cross that border," he turned to Sunpaw seriously. "I don't want you running into trouble."

"Of course," mewed Sunpaw in a small voice, following him past the main part of the river. There was a group of rather flat boulders there, behind them stretching more forest. Sunpaw sniffed the air, which smelled strange.

"These are the Sunningrocks," Stormfoot told her. "Beyond these is RiverClan territory. You can smell them, can't you? There has been a long quarrel with RiverClan on who owns Sunningrocks. It's ours now, but I wouldn't be surprised if they asked for it again."

Sunpaw was starting to think this was quite a boring vital part of training, but she nodded and kept going. They headed past the river and toward Fourtrees where they reached a breezy moor.

"This is the border to WindClan territory," he meowed. "If you smell, you can tell a patrol passed by recently." He flicked his tail and they headed east again.

They passed the sandy training hollow and soon reached a wide, pitch-black, hard-looking strip of land that stretched horizontally about seven fox-lengths from where they stood.

"This, Sunpaw," Stormfoot began, "Is the Thunderpath. It's highly dangerous and where monsters run. Do not ever try to cross it without a warrior. Beyond it is ShadowClan territory. ShadowClan cats are not very trustworthy, so keep your head if you ever come in contact with one."

Sunpaw gulped. She did not know what he meant until she saw something approaching in the distance - something colorful speeding faster and faster. It had enormous black paws and tore across the Path and at last out of sight.

"They cannot leave the Path," continued Stormfoot. "But several cats have been killed by these monsters." He turned to Sunpaw. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," replied Sunpaw with a gulp.

He then led her past the Thunderpath, past the Snakerocks, finishing their circle, to the edge of the forest where strange squarish structures and bushes towered a bit a way.

"This is the Twolegplace," he explained. "Twolegs are also dangerous, and quite strange as well. Another reason not to cross the boundaries."

"Is that it for the boundaries, then?"

"Yes. As long as you follow what I said, it's fairly easy to stay safe. All apprentices are frightened when they first hear about the Thunderpath and the Twolegs."

"Alright," replied Sunpaw.

"Tomorrow we start hunting. One of the rules of the warrior code is

to hunt and bring fresh-kill back for the Clan every day, and you *never* eat your fresh-kill before the Clan is fed. Remember: the Clan is always fed first - beginning with queens, elders, and kits. Violate this rule and you will not eat. Is that clear?"

"Yea," she nodded. She bet that there were lots of rules here. "Can I try to catch my own fresh-kill tomorrow, then?" she piped up.

Stormfoot smiled, then laughed. "Yes, Sunpaw," he said. "You may. Let's get back to camp."

Chapter 4

"Moonpaw. *Moonpaw*!"

"Wha-?" Moonpaw lifted her head from her nest. Swiftclaw had popped her head into the apprentices' den and was calling her name.

"Moonpaw!" Swiftclaw called, exasperated. "Come on, already! We're practicing hunting techniques today!"

"Can I sleep first?" Moonpaw mumbled. She was tired enough from the tour of ThunderClan territory the day before. She tucked her nose back under her chest and slowed her breathing in an attempt to get more comfortable.

"Moonpaw! Get. *Up*!" Swiftclaw marched inside the den and picked the apprentice up by her scruff, dragging her outside like a queen dragging a kit from its nest. "The other apprentices are already out battle training or practicing hunting, like *we* should be doing. Beepaw and Forestpaw are out on a border patrol. Don't you want to practice hunting? Catch your *own* fresh-kill for once?"

Moonpaw looked up at her mentor, blinking in bright sunup-sunshine. "Well, yea..." she began. "I do want to practice hunting, I really do. But I'm so-" she parted her jaws in a huge yawn- "*tired*!" She collapsed onto her side and began to drift to sleep.

Swiftclaw nudged her to her paws. Moonpaw sat and stared at her with eyes half-closed.

"Moonpaw," Swiftclaw began, "I'm worried about you. Yes, you had never been on a longer walk in your life, but you're an apprentice now and should get used to it. But you shouldn't be *this* tired. No other apprentice is ever this tired - coming back from a territory tour. I saw Stormfoot, Sunpaw, Muddypelt, Bluepaw, Fogpaw, and Grasspelt yesterday returning from their tour, and none of them seemed this tired. You even had a full-night's worth of rest. Is there

something wrong? You can tell me." Swiftclaw's head tilted in confusion slightly, and Moonpaw saw that there was genuine concern in her eyes.

"N-No," Moonpaw replied, once again yawning. "I'm just tired."

"Well, perhaps you should get some fresh-kill. It should wake you up."

Moonpaw nodded. She started for the fresh-kill pile, but Swiftclaw stopped her.

"I'm going to talk with Maplestar, okay?" she said.

"Okay," Moonpaw grunted.

"When I get back, we'll go hunting."

"Sounds good."

Swiftclaw nodded approvingly. "Good. Go eat." She bounded off towards Maplestar's den, and Moonpaw made her way towards the fresh-kill pile. Picking out a fat vole, she brought it over and settled down beside her littermates, who had just returned from training.

"Oh hi, Moonpaw," Sunpaw greeted her sister. "I just got back from hunting. I haven't caught anything yet, but it's definitely fun learning!" Her tailed waved back and forth in delight. "So how's your training going?" she inquired.

"Oh, I uh..."

"Yea," Fogpaw piped up. "How's training? Today I practiced battle training," he mewed proudly. "Watch me! I just learned this move today. Seems pretty advanced, but Grasspelt said I could do it. She says I'm such a fast learner, such a good fighter! Here, I'll show you the move." Fogpaw crouched down, tucking his paws under him. Then he leaped, twirling in midair, landing neatly on the ground facing the opposite direction. He then turned back around to face his littermates, puffing his chest out proudly.

"Wow!" Sunpaw's eyes gleamed in amazement. "That was amazing! I

want to do that! Can you teach it to me?"

"Well," replied Fogpaw in a rather authoritive voice, "I would, but Stormfoot should teach you when he thinks you're ready."

Sunpaw poked him with a paw. "Bossy furball," she muttered playfully.

"And I actually caught something today," Bluepaw put in before Sunpaw and Fogpaw could break into a play-fight.

"Awesome!" Moonpaw congratulated her. "What did you catch?"

"This big, fat, juicy rabbit!" Bluepaw boasted, showing them her prey. Fogpaw's eyes widened in astonishment.

"You caught that?" he asked in disbelief.

"Well, yea, I just said that, didn't I?" she snorted playfully, nudging him with her muzzle.

"Come on, guys. Stop poking me!" he groaned. His sisters just giggled.

"Moonpaw!" Swiftclaw called from across the clearing. She hurried towards the apprentice, who was finishing up her vole.

"You got to go now," Bluepaw whispered in her ear.

"I know!" Moonpaw rolled her eyes.

"You ready, Moonpaw?" Swiftclaw asked as she reached her apprentice.

"Sure," she grunted.

"Good. Let's go."

Moonpaw followed her mentor out of ThunderClan camp, bristling as her silver fur snagged on some brambles. She tore forward, biting back a small yelp of pain as she felt a clump of her silver fur tear from her pelt, sticking to the brambles. A growl rose in her throat,

but she shrugged angrily as she realized Swiftclaw was fading into the bushes and from her view. She ran to catch up.

"Moonpaw," Swiftclaw asked, pausing beside a bush, its green leaves rustling gently in the breeze, "what do you smell?"

Moonpaw parted her jaws to drink in the scents that drifted towards her. She detected the sappy scent of ShadowClan, the fishy tang of RiverClan, and the bitter odor of WindClan. Behind all noticeable Clan scents, she also detected an underlying stale, musty scent.

"What's the musty scent?" she asked Swiftclaw. She paused to taste the air.

"Fox," she replied. "But it hasn't been here in awhile, I suspect. It's stale," she added as Moonpaw started to back away.

"Oh, okay." Moonpaw heaved a sigh of relief.

"What else do you smell?" Swiftclaw prompted.

"Hmm... Well, ShadowClan, RiverClan, and WindClan. But also mouse," she reported.

"Very good!" she praised her apprentice. "Now, where is it?"

Moonpaw nodded towards a bush.

"Right, Moonpaw. Now I'll show you the hunter's crouch." Swiftclaw crouched down, sliding forward quietly with her front paws. Moonpaw dropped into a crouch as well, following her movements.

"A mouse will always hear the vibrations from your pawsteps before it sees you coming," she whispered to Moonpaw. "So slide your paws lightly along the ground like this." She slid her paws slowly across the ground, avoiding dry leaves and twigs that could scare the prey away. Moonpaw followed every movement, trying her best to stay awake and focus despite her weakness and sleepiness.

"Keep your rump down!" Swiftclaw ordered as Moonpaw stunk it high in the air. "It'll see your tail all the way up there!" She paused, then went on. "Okay, now try to catch it. You've got the basics

down."

Moonpaw nodded wearily and lowered her body closer to the ground. Slinking forward ever so softly, she neared the mouse. It was sniffing among the leaves, ducking and re-appearing from under the light, dried leaves. Suddenly it froze, sniffing the air. Moonpaw tensed, waiting for it to calm back down. But it squeaked in alarm and dashed through the undergrowth; it had heard her coming and was now fleeing for its life.

Moonpaw yowled as she bounded after it in pursuit. She got close enough to swat at its tail, but before she could pounce, it disappeared under a bramble thicket. Moonpaw skidded to a halt before she ran into the spiky bush.

"Mouse dung!" she spat. She heard Swiftclaw fiddling with a dead leaf beside her, and turned to face her mentor with defeated eyes.

"Bad luck," Swiftclaw observed. "But great for your first try. Your crouch and form was perfect." She flicked a leaf away from her claws. "But you better be getting back to camp now. You're falling off your paws!" She purred loudly, stroking Moonpaw's back with her tail. "I'll catch something to take back." She turned away and headed deeper into the forest. "You'll get the hang of it soon, Moonpaw!" she called over her grey shoulder.

"Okay," Moonpaw murmured, turning towards camp.

"Any luck?" Weaselnose asked Moonpaw as she pushed through the entrance. He was on guard for the morning.

"No," she sighed. "The mouse got away."

The friendly chocolate-colored warrior touched his nose to her ear. "Better luck next time," he purred. Moonpaw nodded.

"Yes, I guess so. Thanks, Weaselnose!" she called over her shoulder as she padded towards the apprentices' den.

The sun was high in the sky when Moonpaw finally settled down in her nest. Aside from Beepaw, she was the only apprentice in the den. *The other apprentices must be training*, she thought. She yawned

and closed her eyes.

"Hey, Moonpaw," Beepaw greeted her.

"Hi," she murmured, trying to hide her annoyance. *Can't I just get a peaceful nap around here?*

"How was hunting?" he meowed.

"Good."

"Cool."

"I'm tired, you know, Beepaw," Moonpaw muttered.

"Oh, yea, sorry." Beepaw flopped down in his nest and began to sleep. Moonpaw did the same.

My second day as an apprentice was a failure. I didn't catch anything, and I couldn't even stay awake, she thought as she finally drifted into her peaceful nap.

Chapter 5

Sunpaw saw it - the mouse was only a few tail-lengths away. She crouched and put each paw forward, one at a time.

"Steady now," meowed Stormfoot, watching in anticipation.

"Hi, Sunpaw!" some cat called. The mouse scampered away. Sunpaw groaned and picked up her ears, turning around to see Bluepaw.

"I was trying to hunt," Sunpaw sighed. "I've only caught a vole."

"Sorry - anyways, I just saw the other apprentices training over there."

"Come on, you two," mewed Muddypelt, padding up behind Bluepaw. "It should be mealtime by now." Stormfoot nodded and the four of them walked back.

Back at camp, Sunpaw dropped off her vole and chose a robin to eat. Then she padded to the apprentices' den.

"Where's Moonpaw?" asked Forestpaw. "I haven't seen her all morning."

"Moonpaw? Moonpaw?" Fogpaw yowled, peering into their den. And there she was, a silver mass of fur huddled in her nest. She rolled over and raised her head, blinking her arctic-blue eyes.

"Moonpaw, it's past sunhigh! Have you even trained yet today?" Bluepaw asked.

Moonpaw blinked again, almost seeming confused. "Oh," she replied quietly. She pulled herself to her paws. "Must've overslept."

"'Overslept' is quite a bit of an understatement," remarked Redpaw, who had just walked in.

"She won't get to be a warrior at this rate," whispered Tinypaw to

Beepaw.

"Anyone up to patrolling?" asked a voice behind them. The ThunderClan deputy, Stormshadow, a large black tom with brown eyes, stood behind the group of apprentices.

"I will," Forestpaw offered. Stormshadow nodded and walked away with her.

"Of course she'll be a warrior," Sunpaw assured them as soon as Stormshadow and Forestpaw walked away. "Don't be ridiculous."

"I think I might want to be a medicine cat," Bluepaw remarked.

"A medicine cat? Why?" asked Fogpaw.

Bluepaw shrugged. "I know I'm a good hunter and all, but it would be cool to know everything Emberfur knows. Heck, maybe I'll talk to her for mentoring."

Redpaw licked his paw and drew it over his ear. "You could now," He said, pointing with his tail where Emberfur was entering the camp through the gorse tunnel with a mouthful of herbs. Bluepaw muttered thanks, although there was something in his eyes she couldn't make out.

"Why not?" Bluepaw asked herself, and she ran to the den where the tortoiseshell she-cat had slipped through the entrance. Entering, Bluepaw watched as Emberfur put the herbs in a large leaf, wrapping them. Emberfur looked up.

"Can I help you?"

"Well, maybe," Bluepaw murmured, suddenly feeling shy. "I wanted to know if you would be willing to take on an apprentice."

"An apprentice?" Emberfur let out a meow of laughter. "But you have barely started your warrior training, and you're supposed to start medicine training when you become an apprentice!" Bluepaw walked closer to Emberfur.

"I know," Bluepaw mewed, "but StarClan requires no one to harm a

medicine cat without good reason, so I would only need to learn hunting and the territory borders."

"I'll consider it, Bluepaw," Emberfur assured her. Her eyes glittered as a sudden breeze shifted the brambles at the front of the den, allowing light to shine in. "Here, put this bunch of poppy seeds in the leaf and put them on one of the shelves. Then take two of them to Littlerose; she hasn't been sleeping well." Bluepaw carefully left out two poppy seeds for the queen, and wrapped the rest. She then picked up the bundle in her jaws, and leaped lightly up to one of the storage shelves, where she scented another wrap, she placed it down, and jumped back down.

"Hey Emberfur, what is in that other wrap?" she asked.

"Oh! Those are borage leaves. They help bring down fevers, and also help queens produce more milk. Speaking of which, take one to Littlerose as well as the poppy seeds, and tell her to eat the borage, then the poppy seeds," Emberfur instructed her carefully.

"Yes Emberfur, I'll be right back to tell you if she says anything." Bluepaw said, and Emberfur nodded.

Bluepaw picked up all the herbs and walked out of the den towards the nursery, where she found the tortoiseshell queen in a dark corner suckling four tiny kits in a mossy nest. She looked up as Bluepaw walked in.

"From Emberfur," Bluepaw mewed, her voice muffled from the mouthful of herbs, and set them by Littlerose. The queen simply nodded and Bluepaw padded out of the nursery. Walking back to the medicine cat den, she remembered something. Entering through the brambles, she called out, "Can I ask you something?"

"Certainly," Emberfur replied.

"It's my sister," she meowed quietly. "Moonpaw. She's always tired now. She's really behind on training too. There's something wrong, isn't there?"

Emberfur paused. "I am not quite sure. I would have to see her." She

stood on of the rocks, putting another leaf wrap on one of the shelves. "You know what happened to your brother, Sparrowkit, correct?"

"Not exactly," Bluepaw murmured, shifting her weight on her blue-grey paws. "Vinestripe just told us he wasn't strong enough."

"Indeed," mewed Emberfur, nodding. "But he also had a certain condition. His lungs were so weak and small he was not taking in enough air." She sighed. "It's a shame. Now go with the other apprentices, I have work to do."

"Okay, thank you!" Bluepaw turned and ran out of the den toward the fresh-kill pile, where the other apprentices were. She felt a little better knowing it, even though it was sad news.

"Well?" Sunpaw asked brightly, "How'd it go?"

"She said she would consider it," Bluepaw mewed.

"You'll be the next medicine cat, Bluepaw," Fogpaw grinned.

"Definitely," Moonpaw agreed.

* * *

"Sunpaw. Sunpaw, get *up*."

"Yeah?" Sunpaw lifted her head wearily. It was Stormshadow again. The sun was just beginning to rise on the horizon.

"I'm going to need you to do the dawn patrol," he said. "I've already picked some of the warriors to go with you."

"Sure thing." Sunpaw bounced up. She stretched and padded to the middle of the clearing and joined two other warriors, Weaselnose and Sandfur. They slipped through the gorse tunnel and and into the dense forest. When they reached the river, they passed the dusk patrol, which included Oakleaf, Lavenderpelt, and an apprentice named Falconpaw, who headed toward camp.

"How long do we patrol?" Sunpaw meowed.

"Around sunhigh. We have to follow the borders, remove scent marks, all those things. Then we can head back," Weaselnose replied. "Feel free to hunt along the way, as long as you stay near us - and don't forget to renew the scent borders. It's very important."

"Of course," agreed Sunpaw, rubbing against a tree where the ThunderClan scent had begun to fade.

Sunpaw caught three robins and a mouse. She buried them near Twolegplace, intending to take them back later. The Twoleg nests were enormous, oddly shaped structures and it made her wonder what sort of creatures would want to live there. Sunpaw sniffed the air and smelled something strange... the smell of cat.

"Sandfur?"

"Yes?

"Are there cats that live in Twolegplace?"

Sandfur scoffed. "Yes," he said, "if you could call them cats. Kittypets have no honor, and no warrior code. They even live with Twolegs, and eat their nasty food. Avoid them if you can." He rubbed her paws over the ground at the edge of the forest, while Weaselnose rubbed against the trees, so the border scent was very strong. Then the patrol headed towards the Thunderpath. Sunpaw had never seen a kittypet, or even heard of one. She wondered how any cat could live without some sort of code to live by. Finally sunhigh arrived, and they walked back to camp carrying fresh-kill for the Clan so they could eat.

Sunpaw noticed that the prey she and the others had caught were not as fat as usual. *Surely,* she thought as she carried a thrush to her den, *leaf-bare could not be coming yet...*

"Sunpaw! Sunpaw, guess what!" A grinning Bluepaw and Fogpaw ran over.

"What?" Sunpaw said.

"Emberfur said I could be her apprentice!" Bluepaw meowed happily.

"That's great!" Sunpaw exclaimed.

Chapter 6

Bluepaw brought moss in through the gorse tunnel. She had to get more so that she could make her nest in the medicine cat's den. *At least the apprentice den won't be so full now,* she thought. She knew already that she would miss the warmth of her siblings. She walked through the brambles covering the medicine cat den and put down the ball of moss, pushing it around to make a nest for herself next to Emberfur's.

"Bluepaw," Emberfur called out from the storage area by the boulders. "Could you come here for a minute? I need you to take more borage leaves to Littlerose."

"Coming, Emberfur!" Bluepaw rushed to the back of the den and picked up two borage leaves. Emberfur was busy inside.

"Are two okay?" Bluepaw talked through the herbs in her mouth.

"Yes, Bluepaw. That's perfect. There is a bit of honey on them to make them taste better."

"Okay." Bluepaw walked out of the den and padded into the nursery. The scent of warm milk flowed around Bluepaw. Sandfur was in the nursery with his mate, watching his kits suckle. Bluepaw felt a little strange, knowing that one day she would have to deliver kits by herself. *Of course, I could give the queen raspberry leaves to help ease...* her mind snapped back to the present. She had heard Emberfur mention that at some point, but couldn't place where

"Littlerose, I brought you more borage leaves with a little honey on them. Is it okay if I check the kits? Emberfur wants to make sure they are okay."

"Of course Bluepaw, thank you." One of the kits was done suckling, and started wandering around the den. He came up to Bluepaw.

"Hi. I'm Scarkit, and I'm going to be the best warrior ever," Scarkit's

voice squeaked. Bluepaw looked down at him, letting out a *mrow* of laughter.

"I'm sure you will be." Bluepaw walked over to the other kits who were all still nursing. She looked them over.

"They all look fine, Littlerose. They are beautiful kits," she reported.

"Thank you, Bluepaw. Tell Emberfur that my paw has been feeling sore ever since I went outside to stretch this morning." Littlerose finished the borage leaf as Bluepaw left the den, and Bluepaw padded into the shady corner where the medicine cat was busy organizing

"Emberfur?" Bluepaw asked as she entered the medicine den. "Littlerose told me her paws are sore. What herb do you use for that?"

"You chew up dock leaves, and put it on the sore pad. Here," she handed Bluepaw a leaf. "Make sure you smell it well so you can remember the scent." Bluepaw nodded, opening her jaws to take in the scent, then picked it up and started chewing as she padded to the nursery again.

It was past sunhigh by the time Bluepaw was done training for the day, and was free to get fresh-kill. She hadn't eaten at all that day, so she chose a rabbit. Sunpaw and Moonpaw walked through the entrance of camp just as she finished the last morsel. They were talking, and didn't seem to see her until they reached the fresh-kill pile.

"Hi Bluepaw! How was your first day as medicine cat apprentice?" Moonpaw dropped a vole and squirrel into the pile.

"It was great."

"Are you sure? You don't look very happy," Sunpaw mewed.

"Yep! Positive. I'd better go see if Emberfur needs anything."

Crickets chirped in the cool twilight. Bluepaw was finally able to rest.

Bluepaw looked through trees, not knowing where she was. Then she spotted movement, and soon a group of cats walked up to her.

"Who are you? Where am I?" Bluepaw asked the cats.

One of them replied, "I am Cocoapelt. I have been sent from StarClan. This is Horsetail, Orangekit, Cedarpaw, Adderstrike, and Drippingstar."

"Am-am I dead?" Bluepaw was horrified.

"No, you are simply in a dream," Drippingstar replied. "Your destiny may lie elsewhere, Bluepaw. That is up to you to discover."

The cats began to fade, and Bluepaw saw through them the trees beginning to lose their leaves, and they disappeared completely...

Bluepaw woke, remembering her dream. *I better stretch.* She walked out of the den and saw Stormshadow organizing the dawn patrol. She turned to go back into the den, and saw Emberfur in the back muttering under her breath. "Catmint, coltsfoot, chickweed, and tansy. That's what we need." She looked to see if Bluepaw was up. "Bluepaw, can you go with the dawn patrol and see if you can find catmint, coltsfoot, chickweed, and tansy? Leaf-bare with be here soon and we need herbs to treat greencough and whitecough."

"Of course, Emberfur. I'll see you later." Bluepaw rushed out to where Stormshadow was finishing getting the patrol ready.

"Wait!" she yowled. "I'm coming to to get herbs there."

"Okay, Bluepaw. Stay close to Oakleaf and Strongheart and don't wander too far away," mewed the deputy.

"Yes, Stormshadow. Thank you." Bluepaw followed the two warriors out of the entrance. They were passing Twolegplace when Bluepaw scented catmint.

"Oakleaf, there's catmint over there. Can you wait while I get it?"

"Sure. Strongheart, you can hunt. I'll watch Bluepaw." Oakleaf sat down just inside the forest. Bluepaw crept along the dirt road and

leapt lightly onto the white fence surrounding one of the Twoleg nests. Leaping down again, she padded up to a large clump of catmint. She bit off a big mouthful of the big leafy stalks with a swift nip, then hurried back to the forest, and set down the catmint.

"Thanks for waiting, Oakleaf. We can go now." Bluepaw picked up the herbs and followed the older cats as they started walking. They were marking the scent on another tree when Bluepaw spotted a patch of coltsfoot.

"Oakleaf," she mewed through the herbs, "Can you get some of that coltsfoot for me?"

"Sure. Here - Strongheart, take your mouse so I can get her herbs." He handed the mouse to Strongheart and ran over to the large rock where the coltsfoot was. He dug his claws into the earth and pulled it up by the roots with his teeth. "This enough?" he asked, his voice now muffled from his full mouth.

Bluepaw nodded. They found some more herbs, then soon after they finished with the patrol Bluepaw and the two warriors traipsed back to camp. Bluepaw made her way to her new mentor's den, who was organizing supplies again.

Emberfur turned around as Bluepaw walked in. "There you are," she said. She took the herbs from her apprentice. "Good," nodded Emberfur. "Not much chickweed, but it'll do." She sighed and went back to her organizing. "Littlestripe is complaining about a bellyache again. Next he'll say he's got whitecough." she laughed weakly. "You haven't experienced a proper leaf-bare, have you? Well. It's nearly greencough season." She turned to Bluepaw. "Enough wasting time, though. Do you know what to give Littlestripe?"

"Watermint," replied Bluepaw lazily.

"Right," meow Emberfur. "Something wrong?"

"No, just tired," Bluepaw assured her, running to get the watermint.

"This enough, Stormfoot?"

"Plenty," nodded the warrior. Sunpaw grinned through her full mouth of rabbit. Fogpaw ran up to Sunpaw.

"Leaf-bare's coming, Sunpaw," he said. "I heard Laceleaf say so."

"Well, it had to come sometime, didn't it?" answered his sister. "It's no big deal, really."

"The Gathering's almost here, too," Fogpaw added. They walked back to the den where the other apprentices were.

"Doubt we'll go," muttered Sunpaw. "Maplestar doesn't usually choose that many apprentices to go, does she?"

"Probably only four of us, if you're talking about the Gathering," Falconpaw chipped in. "I hope I go. I've never met anyone from another Clan."

"None of us have," Redpaw pointed out. "We could ask Maplestar if we can go."

"No, let her choose herself," meowed Tinypaw wisely. "Don't pressure her. She's the Clan leader and has a lot to do."

The sun was starting to set now.

"I bet Bluepaw's having lots of fun being a medicine cat apprentice," mewed Beepaw. "Even though she has so much work to do."

Fogpaw nodded. "But nowadays when I see her with Emberfur, she doesn't look as happy as I thought she would."

"She'll get used to it," said Moonpaw sweetly. "All apprentices are like that. Once she becomes a true medicine cat, I'll bet she'll really enjoy it."

"Speak of StarClan," Redpaw meowed. Bluepaw came bounding over, then put her head on her paws.

"Hi," they all meowed together.

"Hi," she answered languidly, resting her head on her bluish paws,

her ears flicking. "I sort of miss hunting," she admitted. "It's all going out and looking for herbs and thinking. My head's spinning trying to remember all of these." She looked up at her littermates.

"You'll be fine," Redpaw assured her.

Bluepaw was not sure if she wanted to tell them about the dream she had had. She decided to keep quiet. She flicked her tail in the air.

"Bluepaw!"

Bluepaw's ears pricked up. "That's me," she muttered quietly, and ran away toward the medicine cat's den.

"Maybe you're right, Fogpaw," nodded Falconpaw. "She doesn't look unhappy - she looks almost depressed."

Fogpaw shrugged and sat down. "Just a theory," he mewed. "But I bet Moonpaw's got a point too."

"About the Gathering, though," Forestpaw added, wanting to change the subject, "I hear that the ShadowClan elder, Morningclaw, has interesting, crazy stories and tales. If I get to go, I'd think I'd like to hear one or two."

"You want crazy stories," Beepaw laughed, "go ask Buttonweasel."

Forestpaw, his sister, nudged him hard.

"It's true," he said. "I heard him telling some kits some fish-and-mouse story about the mouse-famine that wiped out half the population in every Clan."

"That's not entirely false," replied Tinypaw wisely. "Maybe not quite that many... But there was a leaf-bare that did claim many lives. Windpelt knows the full story if you want *that."* She shot a dark look at Beepaw. "I don't think there's anything wrong with Buttonweasel. He's quirky in his own way, and he's a lot of fun. He told us lots of stories when we were kits."

The other apprentices looked at Tinypaw, who was usually quiet.

"Sure," Tinypaw continued, "Some of his tales are rather funny. But they keep it interesting for the kits. You don't need to be judging cats like that." She flicked her tail and curled in her nest.

Chapter 7

Moonpaw's ear twitched crossly as Maplestar organized the patrol that would be going to the Gathering. She listed her littermates - except for Bluepaw, who had to stay in the medicine cat den in case anything happened - and Falconpaw, Redpaw, Sunpaw, Fogpaw, and Forestpaw, but not Moonpaw, Beepaw or Tinypaw. Her tailed lashed the ground in annoyance.

"Why do *we* have to stay?" she muttered angrily, sitting down in her nest as she watched the patrol leave.

Beepaw and Tinypaw shrugged. "Dunno," they replied, almost bored.

"Don't you guys even care?" Moonpaw glared at them.

They shook their heads.

"We've already been to a Gathering," Beepaw pointed out.

"Right," Moonpaw sighed, curling up in the moss. She rested her head on her forepaws. Beepaw touched his nose to the tip of her ear.

"You'll get to go next Gathering, I bet," he murmured in her ear.

Moonpaw nodded. Then a thought crossed her mind, and she bolted up into a sitting position.

"Hey, guys," she began, "we should go hunting!" Her eyes gleamed as the other apprentices nodded in agreement.

"Sounds good," they meowed, their eyes bright.

"Then let's go!" Moonpaw lead the way out of the den, rushing to the back entrance. Her mind flashed as she remembered that day as a kit, sneaking out of the nursery with Fogpaw. Her heart ached as she bitterly remembered him being chosen to go to the Gathering

without her. She shook her head, pushing out of camp.

"Where are you guys going to go?" she asked as they padded into the trees. Tinypaw nodded towards the opposite direction.

"I'll go that way. You and Beepaw can go the other," she replied, her eyes glowing mischievously.

"Why-" Moonpaw began to protest.

Tinypaw shrugged innocently. "Bye, guys!" She bounded off into the forest.

Moonpaw faced Beepaw, her cheeks growing hot in embarrassment.

"I-I..." She was at a loss of words. The orange tabby tom blinked warmly at her.

"Why are you acting so weird?" he laughed.

"Nothing," she responded awkwardly. "I guess I'll go that way." She pointed her tail into the trees, racing off. She paused, breathing in the scents that steadily drifted towards her.

She jumped as she felt fur brushing her flank. She turned her head to the side, seeing Beepaw beside her. She sighed, trying to ignore him, afraid of making a fool of herself.

"I smell shrew," she finally reported. Beepaw nodded.

"Then go after it, mouse-brain!" he teased. Moonpaw briefly gazed into his dark, yellow eyes and saw genuine warmth. She nodded. Dropping into a crouch, she crept toward a bush, sliding her paws softly in front of her. Her ear flicked forward as she heard the shrew scuttling under the bush. She paused and pounced. But in the split second she paused, her prey had detected her. It fled out of the bush, streaming quickly over the leafy ground. Moonpaw bounded after it, but its speed surprised her. It quickly bounded over the open ground, and Moonpaw picked up her pace. It kept running, but her paws dragged beneath her as she dropped to the ground, heaving in ragged breaths.

Suddenly Moonpaw felt as if she couldn't breathe. She breathed in and out, but her breaths were forced and uneven. She whimpered softly, coughing madly.

"Beepaw!" she managed to screech. She heard paws race through the forest, and weakly lifted her head to see Beepaw rush towards her.

"What happened!" he breathed.

Moonpaw shook her head weakly as, slowly, her breath seemed to come back.

"I-I..." she coughed. "I was chasing the shrew," she whispered. "It was fast!" Her eyes widened as she remembered the thrill of the hunt. "But as I ran faster it got harder to breathe, until I felt like I couldn't." She stared at Beepaw, whose eyes were wide. His jaws moved, but no words came.

"Sp-Sparrowkit," he finally whispered, staring in horror into Moonpaw's icy blue eyes.

"What?" Moonpaw was confused. He shook his head and rushed to her side, pressing his cheek against hers.

"You'll be fine," he choked.

"What?" But as Moonpaw asked, realization flooded her mind. She had overheard Bluepaw talking with Emberfur and how Sparrowkit had died because his lungs were too small to allow him to properly breathe. Moonpaw's eyes stretched wide in fear.

"Me, too?" she whispered. "I have it, too?" She blinked her eyes sadly as Beepaw helped her to her paws. He paused, then nodded.

"I don't know," he murmured as Tinypaw wildy burst through the trees.

"What happened?" she demanded, her gaze resting on Moonpaw.

"Moonpaw!" She rushed over to prop her up, as she was beginning to sink lower on her paws.

Moonpaw glanced at them. She was breathing steadily now, and strength gradually flooded back into her paws. "I'm fine now, guys," she smiled weakly.

Beepaw looked her over. "I know. I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

Moonpaw flashed a grateful look at him as he reassured Tinypaw.

"She's fine now, really," he was meowing. "I can tell the hard breathing was only temporary. But you should run back to camp and tell Bluepaw what's happened."

Tinypaw eyed him suspiciously, but nodded, racing toward camp.

As soon as she was gone Moonpaw turned to the tom. "Er... thank you," she murmured. "I'm fine now." She paused, gazing into Beepaw's eyes, feeling more confident. "But what's you send Tinypaw off for?" she teased.

Beepaw stifled a *mu-row* of laughter. Then his eyes grew serious. "We have to do something about this disorder," he told Moonpaw. She nodded hesitantly.

"Yea... Look what it did to me back there..." Her eyes suddenly grew wide. "Bluepaw mustn't tell anyone about this. What if it keeps me from becoming a warrior? I don't know what else I could do!"

Beepaw nodded. "We'll make sure no one finds out other than Tinypaw and Bluepaw."

"Thanks, Beepaw."

"Sure. And," he added, "I'm glad we went hunting together. It was fun! Well... up until when you sort of ran out of breath..." Beepaw hesitated, then gave her ear a friendly lick.

Moonpaw gazed at him, confident she had made a new friend. "Thanks for being so kind to me," she mewed happily.

Beepaw gave his chest a quick embarrassed lick. "Sure. And thanks for hunting with me again, even if it didn't quite turn out well." He

looked back up and purred warmly.

"Yea," she murmured. "It was fun up until then. But we should get home. I'll bet Bluepaw's waiting for me."

Beepaw nodded, guiding her up to camp, his fur lightly brushing hers a few times.

"Go see Bluepaw," he advised, briefly pressing his cheek against hers. With that he trotted off to the apprentices' den, his tail flicking happily behind him. When he disappeared from sight, Moonpaw made her way to the medicine den. She cast a quick longing glance at the apprentice den, but pushed into the den without a word.

Chapter 8

"Emberfur? Bluepaw?"

Both she-cats raised their heads from what had been little mounds of fur moments before.

"Do you need something, Moonpaw?" Emberfur inquired with a mew as she stood up.

"Well, sort of," Moonpaw sighed. "I was trying to hunt just moments ago, and I nearly caught a shrew... But before I could pounce, I sort of ran out of breath." She looked up at the tortoiseshell she-cat pleadingly. "Beepaw thinks I might have a disorder. Do you know why?"

Emberfur looked at her knowingly. "I have a theory," she mewed softly. "You must have heard about Sparrowkit?"

Moonpaw nodded.

"Yes," meowed Emberfur. "I believe you have the same disorder. You must be careful, Moonpaw. Though this may not be fatal, it may be harmful."

Bluepaw stood up, blinking at them both. She trotted over to the storage-shelves and got out a handful of herbs that looked like a bit like a dandelion.

"Here, take it," she chimed in a motherly way. "It's coltsfoot. It should help you breathe better."

Moonpaw took it. "Thanks, Bluepaw," she meowed, and she trotted off to the apprentices' den.

"Leaf-bare is on its way," remarked Creekstar, the leader of

RiverClan, from the Great Rock in the Fourtrees. "My Clan would wants to know how you are coping."

"Our prey is getting thinner," reported Maplestar, "But we are not having any problems yet." Her tail flicked. "How about you, Dewstar?"

Dewstar looked at the assembly of cats. "WindClan has been starting to run out of prey," she mewed, "But nothing serious yet. But I am concerned - the cold has come early this season. It is sure to get far worse." Her words echoed over everyone.

The leaders went on talking. Sunpaw didn't find much of it interesting. Out of the corner of her eye, some ShadowClan apprentices were chatting animatedly together.

When the leaders stopped talking, the Gathering ended. Sunpaw was tired; only parts of the Gathering had been interesting. Fogpaw padded up to her.

"Wonder why she didn't choose Moonpaw to come," he wondered aloud, shrugging. "I know Bluepaw had to stay, but..." he stopped, not knowing what to say.

"Maybe it's for the best," Sunpaw said, gathering with her Clan near their corner of the Fourtrees.

Soon, sunup came. It was quite a chilly morning. Sunpaw trotted out with Stormfoot to the training hollow.

"You've come a long way, Sunpaw," nodded Stormfoot. "I reckon you'll be able to be a warrior in a few moons."

Sunpaw's eyes lit up. "You really think so?" she said. "I'm really excited."

"Of course," agreed Stormfoot proudly. "Now let's work on battle moves."

"Great," mewed his apprentice. Stormfoot crouched near the edge of the hollow, ready to pounce. Sunpaw did the same on the other side. Stormfoot jumped and ran after her, pouncing on her. Sunpaw

unsheathed her claws and dodged him, then tried to bowl him over to get at his belly. As she tried, her claw slipped and scratched his face.

She gasped. "Oh! Stormfoot! I'm so sorry!"

But he was laughing. He held a paw over his scratch. "Nothing to worry about," he reassured her. "You've done well. But claws sheathed from now on."

"Alright," Sunpaw agreed, shoulders sagging in shame. They left the training hollow together.

"I'll talk to Maplestar about your warrior ceremony," he added as they padded back to camp. "You're definitely improving. A few more moons, and you'll be ready!"

Sunpaw glowed, praise filling her heart like a balloon. A real-life warrior, her mentor, was telling her this! She grinned as they strolled through the moss and undergrowth. A chilly breeze ruffled her fur.

"So, hunting then?" she inquired.

"Yes," mewed Stormfoot. "I bet most of the prey are in their warm nests today. But we can try. You heard Dewstar; prey will start to disappear soon enough. But I need to tell you something."

"And what's that?"

"I've been talking to the other mentors about taking you and your littermates to the moonstone before you complete your training," he explained. "So make sure you're ready to leave."

"When are we going?"

"Right now."

"Now?" They pushed through the gorse tunnel. "At such short notice? Which mentors are coming?"

"All of them," Stormfoot replied. "It's good that you have several

warrior escorts; we need to cross WindClan territory to get to Highstones."

Emberfur's travelling herbs felt like an unnaturally heavy stone in Sunpaw's belly. Her paws ached; it seemed they had been walking all day already. She tasted the scent of the WindClan marker and then a stronger smell - a patrol!

"Let's hide in a bush somewhere!" Fogpaw suggested suddenly.

"Absolutely not!" Grasspelt chided him. "We don't want to seem like we're hiding from them - they'll think we're a threat."

"Okay..."

"I smell ThunderClan!" Sunpaw heard a voice.

"Lead us, Finchpaw." An older-sounding voice.

"There they are!" a ginger-and-white apprentice burst out, hackles raised so that she looked twice her normal size. "What are you doing on WindClan territory, mange-pelts?"

A reddish tom swiped his tail over Finchpaw's. "Easy now, Finchpaw," he meowed smoothly. In a businesslike manner he stood up straight, looking into Swiftclaw's eyes. "What brings you here?"

"We're just passing through," she dipped her head respectfully, unlike anything the apprentices had ever seen before. "We're on our way to the moonstone. We mean no harm."

"We'll see about that," a dark blue she-cat hissed. "Let's escort them to the border, Foxclaw."

"Good idea," the first tom nodded.

The apprentices felt oddly small as they padded toward Highstones, which was in full view now. Only the Thunderpath stood in the way.

"W-we don't have to *cross*, right?" Bluepaw shivered.

"Yes," Swiftclaw nodded. "Moonpaw, Muddypelt, Bluepaw and I will go first. The rest will follow."

Sunpaw felt the hairs on her neck stand straight up as a monster roared past.

Swiftclaw looked sniffed the air, looking side to side, and dashed to the other end without a signal. Moonpaw scrambled after her, Bluepaw just ahead with Muddypelt. Sunpaw let out a breath of relief.

"Our turn," Fogpaw breathed weakly.

Grasspelt did the same as Swiftclaw and Sunpaw raced across, a monster popping up in the distance.

"Hurry!" Bluepaw squealed.

Sunpaw felt Fogpaw's breath quicken as they hurried. The monster was getting closer, closer -

Something hit the tip of Sunpaw's tail. She was alright.

Mothermouth, where the moonstone was located in the deep cave, loomed above them.

What would StarClan have in store for her?

A squarish hole was cut in the ancient rock; there was nothing special about the entrance except that to them it looked like huge jaws ready to swallow them. Muddypelt turned to them.

"When you see the stone, touch your muzzle to it," he commanded. "It's too dark in there to see, so follow our scent instead."

"Okay," they all breathed at once. One by one they entered, the musty darkness bathing each one and swallowing them whole in the soundless black. As soon as Sunpaw felt that her paws would freeze to death, she saw a glimmer of light.

The whole circular room in the cave where the moonstone shimmered and shone seemed tiny then, with so many apprentices

and warriors cramped inside. Sunpaw rushed forward, touching her muzzle to it as directed.

She felt as if she had been tossed into an icy lake. Images swerved in front of her as she fought to get a pawhold on ground. Suddenly a huge forest stretched above her, bathing her in warm sunshine.

A dark she-cat was padding through the bracken, coming towards her. "Welcome," she purred. "Sunpaw."

"Who are you?" she gasped. "Are you from StarClan?"

"I am," the she-cat replied. "I am Greypuddle, Robinfeather's mother."

"What are you here to tell me?"

Greypuddle purred, ears pricked. "Patience is a good thing to learn," she replied. "But I will tell you. When you are a warrior, you will receive a prophecy that you and your littermates will share. I cannot reveal to you the prophecy now, but you must prepare your heart."

"What does that mean? Why can't I know *now*?"Sunpaw was frustrated. What was the point in all this secrecy?

"StarClan works in ways you do not understand, my child," Greypuddle told her. "Remember - you must be *patient.* You will understand."

Sunpaw found herself sitting in the icy cave, the dream now over. What did she mean?

* * *

"Emberfur..."

"Yes?" Emberfur replied. "Do you need something, Bluepaw?"

"Yeah," she said, sitting down. Her tail flicked from side to side. She paused. "I don't think I'm meant to be a medicine cat," she finally said.

"What makes you say that?" Emberfur meowed in her soft voice.

"Well... A while ago, I had a dream. Some cats from StarClan visited me and told me that my 'destiny may lie elsewhere'. To be very honest, I'm not very satisfied with being a medicine cat apprentice."

Emberfur bowed her head. "I understand. Go tell Muddypelt, your former mentor. I'll talk to Maplestar. And I hear your littermates will soon be warriors. Oh - and do you remember who came to you in StarClan?" Her eyes glittered. She went on. "Anyway, if you hurry, you may become a warrior at the same time."

Bluepaw grinned. "Thanks, Emberfur. I remember Adderstrike and Drippingstar were there - but I can't remember any others." she saw Emberfur nod, and bounded off.

"Guys!" she called excitedly as she padded into the apprentices' den. "I'm going to be a warrior instead!"

The other apprentices looked amazed. "Really? I didn't know you could back out of apprenticeship," Fogpaw mewed.

"Guess so," Bluepaw replied happily.

Moonpaw shuffled her paws under her.

"Muddypelt is my mentor again," mewed Bluepaw, beaming. Redpaw walked over to her.

"You're going to be a warrior again?" His eyes gleamed, "That's great!" He lowered his voice. "I missed having you around, Bluepaw. You're such a great hunter." He purred before padding out of the den.

The next sunup the apprentices awoke to find camp covered with a thin film of frost. Sunpaw padded out of the den with Fogpaw to hunt. Pushing through the gorse tunnel, they headed toward the Sunningrocks to try to heat up.

"Think we'll find anything in this weather?" grunted Fogpaw. A branch from a tree above bent and snow fell on top of him.

"Maybe," mewed Sunpaw.

"Snow is strange," he said, twitching his ears so it fell off again.

Sunpaw caught the smell of a nearby finch and dropped onto her haunches. She pricked up her ears and turned toward the source of the scent. Fogpaw stood silently while Sunpaw slowly put each paw in front of the other, claws unsheathed. She saw it pecking at the frosty ground. The pads on Sunpaw's paws seemed frozen.

Sunpaw eyed it closely. Then she pounced.

Sunpaw gave it a swift bite to the neck, then dropped it on the forest floor. Sunpaw sighed and a breath of steamy air was exhaled from her nostrils.

"It's practically crowfood," Fogpaw muttered, padding over. "We'd be better off with birdseed."

"Well, at least it's something." Sunpaw flicked her tail in annoyance, picking the feathers from the skinny dead bird out of her teeth. "It's leaf-bare now."

Fogpaw's ears pricked up as if he had heard something, but then settled down again. "Wonder how the other apprentices are faring."

Soon they both returned to camp. Luckily, they *had* managed to catch more prey, but far less than usual. They dropped their pathetic kill on the fresh-kill pile and took small things to eat. Beepaw and Moonpaw were chatting together, and Bluepaw and Forestpaw were sharing tongues.

"Hunting go well?" Redpaw asked as they entered their den.

"Not very," Fogpaw replied, placing his robin in front of him and poking it halfheartedly. He dipped his head down and took a bite, then choked it down. "Definitely getting stringier," he meowed.

"Don't be such a kittypet," Forestpaw hissed. "Warriors will eat whatever keeps them strong, not what keeps their bellies full."

Fogpaw shrugged.

"We're apprentices, Forestpaw, not warriors yet," Falconpaw objected defensively. "There's no need to call anyone a kittypet."

Forestpaw stretched and started to groom herself, pretending to not have heard him. Another breeze blew through the camp, ruffling their fur and chilling them.

"Bet WindClan's having a *wonderful* time in this cold," mewed Beepaw sarcastically.

Chapter 9

Bluepaw was woken by the rustling of dry moss next to her. Slowly opening her eyes, she saw Moonpaw slip through the warm apprentice den.

"Moonpaw?" Bluepaw jerked around, "Are you okay?"

"Oh. It's you. I'm fine." She sat and started grooming herself. Bluepaw wasn't convinced. She curled back into her warm nest and slowed her breath, pretending to be asleep. She heard Moonpaw pause grooming and look at Bluepaw carefully, then turn and push through the den entrance. Bluepaw waited for a few heartbeats then followed, slowly making sure she didn't make any noise. Stalking out, she watched as Moonpaw poked her head into the medicine cat den. Bluepaw moved closer, and watched Moonpaw go all the way in. *I hope she's okay*, she thought. Turning, she walked quickly to the fresh-kill pile, recently stocked by the dusk patrol.

She glanced up from her vole when Maplestar came out of her den and started sharing tongues with the Stormshadow. She started hearing voices of other cats waking from the cold night.

"Bluepaw? Bluepaw, what are you doing up already?" Fogpaw's meow made her turn.

"Just hoping I can go on the dawn patrol." Bluepaw licked her lips, and heard Moonpaw walk out of the medicine cat den. She walked over to the fresh-kill pile, chose a squirrel, and gulped it down. Stormshadow walked over just as Sunpaw walked out of the den.

"Do you all want to go on the dawn patrol?" the deputy asked. Muddypelt rushed out of the warrior den before anyone could reply.

"I need to take Bluepaw training; she missed a bit," Muddypelt said.

"Of course, go ahead." Stormshadow looked at Bluepaw expectantly.

"Oh yeah. Sure, Muddypelt, I'll be ready whenever you are." Bluepaw looked at her littermates. The other apprentices finally came out of the den.

"Hi Bluepaw!" Redpaw meowed in greeting. "How are you?"

"I'm good." The apprentices briefly began to talking and sharing tongues, when eventually Muddypelt came and told Bluepaw it was time to go.

At the training hollow Muddypelt explained Bluepaw that they would be learning how to fight badgers.

"Once they are close enough, leap over your opponent, turning in the air. Then bite their leg." Muddypelt demonstrated. He leapt over Bluepaw, and spun around, ready to nip her back leg.

"Can I try?" Bluepaw was excited.

"Of course. Remember to leap as high as you can." Bluepaw jumped over Muddypelt easily, and turned mid-air, and as she was falling, she held her paw, claws sheathed, on Muddypelt's pelt. She landed and nipped his hind leg gently.

"Great job, Bluepaw. That part you added to will be helpful too, with your paw."

They continued training until sunhigh. Finally, Muddypelt stopped.

"It's time to hunt. Come on." He signaled her with his tail, and she followed. Bluepaw caught three small mice, and they decided to head back to camp. It was nearly sundown, and the dusk patrol was about to leave.

"Muddypelt? Can I go with them?" Bluepaw wanted some time with the other apprentices.

"Ask Stormshadow if you can go."

Bluepaw nodded and walked toward Stormshadow, who was a few tail-lengths away.

"Stormshadow?" she mewed politely. "Can I go on the dusk patrol as well?"

"Sure, Bluepaw. As long as you aren't too tired. You and Muddypelt were out almost all day."

"Thanks, Stormshadow. I'm not tired at all!" She walked over to where the patrol was waiting. Tinypaw, Redpaw, Falconpaw, Sandfur, Strongheart, and Oakleaf were waiting by the gorse entrance.

Soon they started padding past the old, stinking Thunderpath. Tinypaw slowed down and parted her mouth to speak.

"ShadowClan!" she exclaimed. "Strongheart! ShadowClan is on our territory! I can smell them!"

"*What*? Are you sure?" Strongheart opened his jaws, breathing in the rancid stench of the Thunderpath.

"You're right. Follow the scent, and be careful, okay?" Strongheart nodded to Tinypaw. Bluepaw was ecstatic. *This is the most exciting thing I've done in my entire life!*

Suddenly, a yowl broke from the brambles. Six ShadowClan cats jumped at the patrol. Redpaw bristled next to her Bluepaw, making her feel nervous.

"If I say 'run', Bluepaw, run as fast as you can back to camp to get help, okay?" Muddypelt murmured in her ear. Bluepaw nodded. Oakleaf hissed at the ShadowClan cats.

"What are you doing on ThunderClan territory? Get off now, or we'll make you."

"Yeah, well I'd like to see you try," Swampstep sneered, and flicked his tail. The ShadowClan cats attacked the patrol. Stillpaw leaped at Redpaw, clawing his ear. Bluepaw yowled, and bowled her off of Redpaw. The two she-cats tumbled in the dust, kicking and scratching violently. Stillpaw leaped on top of Bluepaw, pinning her down. Malicious hatred and starvation shined in Stillpaw's eyes. Bluepaw's eyes stretched wider and wider. *She can't kill me, can she?*

It's against the warrior code, right? Redpaw shook off Frogpaw, and raced to where Bluepaw was pinned down. He dug his claws into Stillpaw's flank, and, heaving with effort, pulled her from on top of Bluepaw.

"Run. Now!" He hissed at her, before turning and leaping back into battle, pulling Ghostwhisker off of Tinypaw. Bluepaw tore off through the heaving masses of cats. Claws ripped at her shoulder, digging into her flesh, and running all the way down her pelt in an attempt to stop her from running. Bluepaw dug her paws into the soft soil, forcing herself to go faster. She had to get to the camp...

"Help!" she screeched. "Help! ShadowClan is attacking the patrol by the Thunderpath!" She reached the camp and skidded to a halt. Yowling, she spread the alarm. Moonpaw and Fogpaw were at her side, and Sunpaw raced out of the apprentice den. Stormshadow bounded out of the warriors' den, calling Grasspelt, Weaselnose, and Swiftclaw to follow him. They sprinted out of the gorse tunnel towards the fighting.

Emberfur ran out of her den, heading towards Bluepaw. A pool of blood was already forming by the blue apprentice. She helped her into the den, and laid her down in the moss bedding.

"Where does it hurt?" she asked soothingly.

"My side. It got scratched a bit." Bluepaw's flanks heaved with exhaustion. Moonpaw peeked in, swallowing as she saw the crimson blood drip off of Bluepaw's pelt.

"Here, eat this." Emberfur handed her some coltsfoot, and started chewing another poultice to put on the wound.

Emberfur started licking the cut on Bluepaw's flank. When she was finished, she placed a poultice along the wound, then wrapped it in cobwebs.

"Just rest here," she instructed. "I'll be back soon."

Bluepaw fell asleep.

* * *

Stormshadow and the fresh warriors arrived at battle. They quickly chased off the ShadowClan cats.

"And don't think about coming back," Tinypaw hissed at the beaten apprentices, giving Frogpaw one less tuft of fur, as they followed the warriors, tails and heads high. The patrol started back towards camp, injured and tired. Emberfur waited by the gorse tunnel, picking out the cats with the worst wounds.

"Tinypaw, Oakleaf, Falconpaw, and Redpaw, to my den." Oakleaf started to object, but Emberfur cut him off. "Now," Emberfur hissed, cuffing him lightly on the ear. "The rest of you, get some rest. I'll check on you later." She padded behind the injured cats.

"Emberfur? Is Bluepaw okay?" Tinypaw asked as they trudged into the medicine cat den.

"Yes, Tinypaw. She'll be fine," Emberfur responded, heading to the back of her den and taking out a bundle of dried oak leaves and cobwebs.

"All of you, start licking your cuts." Oakleaf finished licking his wounds while Emberfur chewed another poultice. She put it on Oakleaf's wound and wrapped it with cobwebs.

"You're good to go. Don't reopen the wound, okay?" Emberfur put the same poultices on the apprentices. Wrapping Tinypaw's hindpaw with cobwebs, she flicked her tail signaling that she needed to stay in the den. Falconpaw, fortunately, only had minor injuries.

"You can go back to the apprentice den. Sleep well." She turned to Redpaw. His ear was torn to shreds, and he had cuts all over him. He sat still as Emberfur dressed his wounds, and he watched as Tinypaw curled up and fell asleep in a comfy moss nest.

"That scratch on your ear is pretty bad," Emberfur murmured to Redpaw. "You are going to have to stay in here with the others for awhile."

He nodded, and licked up the poppy seed Emberfur gave him. He

curled up into the nest, and fell asleep as Emberfur walked out of the den to check the other warriors.

Chapter 10

Moonpaw yawned, lifting her head up from her nest. Her paws ached from the day before; she had been rushing around the medicine den, constantly checking upon her wounded littermates after the fight with the ShadowClan patrol. As she had finally entered her den and sank into her nest, she had found sleeping hard with her rasping breaths. She shook her head to clear her thoughts and nosed her way out of the den. In the clearing she spotted Beepaw picking out a juicy squirrel from the fresh-kill pile and trotted over to him; the two had become good friends after the last several days.

"Hi," she greeted him. He looked up from his squirrel and smiled warmly.

"Hi, Moonpaw," he purred. "Would you like to share this squirrel with me? I'm nearly full."

Moonpaw gazed at the fresh-kill, her stomach rumbling and growling with hunger. "I thought you'd never ask!" she teased and settled down beside him.

"So, what did you think of the battle yesterday?" Beepaw asked. His striking orange pelt almost glowed like the sun on the dazzling sunlight.

Moonpaw shrugged. "Typical ShadowClan." She rolled her eyes. "Always seem to be getting into trouble." Beepaw nodded.

"They must have been really hungry," he observed.

"Yeah," Moonpaw agreed, looking thoughtful. "They must have been crazy, thinking they could beat *ThunderClan*!" she huffed, puffing out her chest as if she herself had done the fighting.

Beepaw's eyes gleamed as he pawed at a leaf, pretending it to be a ShadowClan warrior. He pounced on it and ripped it apart with his

claws, purring with pleasure.

"Take that, ShadowClan!" he yowled. Moonpaw snorted with laughter.

"Yes, and we have the bravest warrior in ThunderClan to get rid of those mange-pelts!" Moonpaw teased, her voice full of playful sarcasm.

He looked at her, his dark yellow eyes blazing. "I'll show those mange-pelts! Crow-food eaters!"

"I'm sure you-"

"Beepaw! Moonpaw!" Swiftclaw padded up to them. "Stop acting like kits! You're apprentices now! And," she glanced at Moonpaw, "I've already told you once, Moonpaw, when you were first apprenticed. And just because now you are further along in your apprenticeship doesn't mean you get to behave like this. More reason to not, frankly."

Moonpaw rose to her paws, sudden anger burning in her like a forest fire. "Can't we have a little fun?" she snapped at her mentor. She winced as the older cat narrowed her eyes, her voice full of hostility.

"Don't you *dare* speak back to your mentor! Or anyone!" she hissed. A growl rose in her throat.

"Well, Beepaw and I deserve a little fun! We're just sharing a squirrel and having a good time!" Moonpaw retorted. "We aren't training *every* moment of our lives!"

Swiftclaw bared her teeth at Moonpaw, but the apprentice stood up straighter, unruffled by her mentor's anger.

"Watch your mouth," Swiftclaw growled, stalking away towards Maplestar's den.

Moonpaw sat down, sighing. "I shouldn't have done that," she murmured, looking up at Beepaw. His eyes were wide in disbelief.

"W-Wow! Moonpaw!" he stuttered. "Just... Wow! No one ever talks back to Swiftclaw! She can have the temper of a badger at times!"

"No biggie," Moonpaw muttered. "She's my mentor, though..."

Beepaw nodded. "Yea, and Maplestar probably thinks you deserve punishment," he said, lowering his voice and nodding towards Maplestar, who was bounding up to them, her fur bristling.

"Moonpaw! Get over here!" she demanded. Beepaw gave her a quick lick on the ear in a weak form of encouragement before she started towards her leader. Ears flattened and head down, she faced Maplestar.

"I-"

"My den. Now." Maplestar whisked away to her den, Moonpaw following steadily behind. She didn't hesitate when they reached the cave and pushed through the entrance. Maplestar sat in her nest, her tail curled neatly around her paws. Moonpaw sat in front of her on the dusty floor.

"Swiftclaw told me what happened," she began. "Do you have anything to say for yourself, as to why you would talk back so brutally to your mentor, and especially since she's a senior warrior? If so, speak up, apprentice. You know that senior warriors deserve respect."

Moonpaw gulped. "I think apprentices deserve a little fun," she said, lowering her head in submission. Her voice quivered. When she looked back up she saw that Maplestar's gaze had softened.

"Of course apprentices deserve fun! You work so, so hard!" Maplestar mewed. Then she tilted her head, her tone changing slightly. "Is this really what this is about?"

"I guess..."

"Okay. Moonpaw, for a punishment for speaking back to a warrior you will clean out the elser's bedding for a quarter moon. But I will have to speak with Swiftclaw. She does have a point, though. You must watch when it is time to be an apprentice and when it is time

to be a warrior."

"Yes, Maplestar. I'm-" Her leader paid no attention.

"And the time was right," she went on. "You and Beepaw have done no harm." She smiled and beckoned Moonpaw closer. "I can find you a second mentor to assist Swiftclaw, if you want," she whispered.

Moonpaw shook her head. "Swiftclaw is a great mentor," she mewed. "I'm glad you want me happy, but I already am. One mistake won't change her from being a great mentor." She was pleased when Maplestar nodded, and how she heard wisdom in her own words.

"Thank you, Moonpaw. You may go now. And remember your punishment."

Moonpaw nodded and trotted out of the den, dipping her head to Maplestar in respect as she exited.

Beepaw was waiting at the entrance. "How'd it go?" he whispered.

"You shouldn't be here, right in front of Maplestar's den, mouse-brain!" Moonpaw was surprised. "But it went fine. I have to clean out the elder's bedding for a quarter-moon, but it's all good."

"Good. I don't think you deserve punishment at all. But I guess that's not too bad," Beepaw murmured.

"Yea, I guess so. Come on, let's get back to the apprentice den before our mentors come and get us for training."

Beepaw nodded. "Good idea."

As Moonpaw led him into the den, she couldn't help but think about the long quarter-moon that lay ahead. She sighed, sitting down in her nest.

"Hey, Moonpaw," Fogpaw whispered. She jumped at his voice; she hadn't realized he was in the den.

"Oh, hi, Fogpaw."

"How's your morning going?" he asked.

Moonpaw shrugged, remembering her time in her leader's den. "Fine. Nothing exciting happened," she lied.

"When are mornings ever exciting?" Fogpaw chimed in.

"But Moonpaw-" Beepaw chipped in. Moonpaw shot him a warning glance, telling him that she didn't want to talk about it.

"Yea. Nothing exciting," he quickly said. Moonpaw rolled her eyes. Fogpaw just shrugged.

"Is Swiftclaw taking you out?" he asked.

"Yea, I don't know when, though."

"She'll be here."

Moonpaw nodded.

"Moonpaw!" Swiftclaw yowled into the den.

"Speaking of which," Moonpaw sighed. "I'll be needed." The apprentices nodded as she trotted out of the den.

Chapter 11

Bluepaw woke in the medicine cat den. Her ears perked up as Emberfur walked into the den carrying a small bundle of herbs. Beside her, Tinypaw and Redpaw stirred and woke as well. Bluepaw started to stretch, wincing at the pain in her side. Emberfur padded over.

"Good morning, Bluepaw. Redpaw, how are you feeling?"

"My ear feels like it's on fire, but I'm okay." Emberfur nodded and applied another poultice to his wound.

"It feels better now. Thank you, Emberfur," Redpaw murmured

"Emberfur? My leg feels much better. Can I go out now?" Tinypaw called out from her nest. Emberfur hurried over to her, sniffing and lightly prodding where Tinypaw had been injured.

"Alright, but be careful." Emberfur nodded reluctantly.

"Okay, and Falconpaw will take care of me anyway!" Tinypaw rose from her nest slowly, testing her leg. She limped slightly as she walked out of the den.

"I'll bring some fresh-kill for you in a minute," she called over her shoulder as she pushed out of the den.

Bluepaw and Redpaw finished eating the rabbit that Tinypaw had brought them when Stormshadow walked into the den.

"Emberfur? Can I talk to you?" he asked.

Emberfur nodded, and followed him out of the den.

"I'll be back in a minute," Emberfur told the apprentices.

"How are you feeling?" Redpaw asked once Emberfur had left.

"Fine. Thanks for saving me from Stillpaw." Bluepaw eyes widened from the memory. "I thought she was going to - to kill me." Bluepaw's voice was hardly over a whisper.

"I wouldn't let a scrawny ShadowClan 'paw hurt you." He murmured into her ear. "We're Clanmates, after all."

"I know." Bluepaw swatted him playfully. "I think you Tinypaw, and Falconpaw are going to be warriors, too."

"You deserve it more than I do." Redpaw sighed, and curled back into his nest. Bluepaw licked the tip of his ear, and started grooming herself.

A quarter moon passed, the days passing slowly, when Emberfur finally let the two apprentices out of the den.

"Bluepaw! You're finally out!" Fogpaw rushed towards her. "You were in the medicine den for almost a half a moon!"

"It's good to finally be out," Bluepaw purred, and licked the tip of his ear affectionately.

"Did you hear? Falconpaw, Tinypaw, and Redpaw are going to be warriors soon!" Sunpaw walked up behind her. "I heard Stormshadow talking with Maplestar the other day," she confessed, looking down.

"That's great! I can hardly even wait!" Bluepaw purred, and padded to the fresh-kill pile.

The sun finally came the next morning, the day when their companions were to be assessed.

"Redpaw!" Bluepaw called to him as he left the apprentice den. "Good luck today!"

"Thanks, Bluepaw," He mewed gratefully, then hurried toward his mentor, Oakleaf.

The assessment started. The three apprentices bounded off in separate directions.

Redpaw scented a mouse, and dropped into a hunter's crouch. It was leaf-bare, so every piece of leaf and seed was important in the assessment. Stalking forward, he saw the mouse scratching around in the dirt, unaware of his presence. He jumped, and caught it, taking it quickly. He scraped dirt over it to collect it later.

Tinypaw was worried, the pressure of the assessment haunting her. Scenting a vole ahead of her, she carefully stalked forward...

Falconpaw had caught three small mice and a shrew, when finally, his mentor, Strongheart, fetched him and told him it was time to go back to camp.

Sunrise, sunhigh, then sundown soon passed. The assessment had been over the course of a whole day. Everyone waited in camp - no one was allowed to leave so they would stay out of the way. A dawn patrol had gone out along with the hunting patrol to ensure that the elders and queens could eat.

At last the three emerged from the gorse tunnel looking, if possible, even more tired than the previous day. They dropped their catch in front of them, tiredly.

"Well done," Stormshadow praised them. The mentors stood across from each apprentice, looking thoroughly impressed.

One by one they went to Stormshadow and whispered something in his ear - they were saying if they could be warriors or not, Sunpaw guessed. Finally Stormshadow nodded and faced the apprentices.

"All of you have done well," mewed Stormshadow. "Tonight, all of you will be made warriors."

Sunpaw saw their eyes widen in glee. Maplestar smiled and jumped onto the Highrock.

"May all old enough to catch their own prey gather here beneath the Highrock for the warrior ceremony!" she yowled.

Sunpaw and her littermates ran over to the crowd. The others were in front of the Highrock, gazing expectantly at Maplestar.

"I, Maplestar, leader of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices." She now looked at Redpaw, Tinypaw and Falconpaw. "They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as a warrior in their turn." She turned to Redpaw who looked ready to burst with pride.

"Redpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend the Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Redpaw bowed his head. "I do," he mewed.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Redpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Redflame. StarClan honors your bravery and justice, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan." Maplestar rested her chin on his head, and in turn he respectively licked her shoulder.

She turned to Falconpaw.

"Falconpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend the Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Falconpaw looked up at Maplestar. "I do."

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Falconpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Falconwing. StarClan honors your confidence and courage, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

Finally, she turned to Tinypaw.

"I do," Tinypaw meowed in her small voice.

"Tinypaw, from this moment on you will be known as Tinyblossom. StarClan honors your compassion and quick thinking, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

The ceremony now ended, the excited mews of cats erupted from

the crowd, chanting their names: "Redflame! Falconwing! Tinyblossom! Redflame! Falconwing! Tinyblossom!" The new warriors smiled while Maplestar and their mentors looked at them proudly.

"The new warriors will now have to keep a silent vigil for the night," meowed Maplestar. The new warriors nodded and took their places in the middle of camp while everyone went to their dens to sleep.

Chapter 12

Sunpaw's whiskers twitched as she plodded through the frosty ground, the even chillier breeze ruffling her fur. She hadn't managed to catch anything that frigid sunup except for a tiny shrew. Hunger tore at her stomach. She considered burying it and then coming back for it to bring it to camp.

She dug a small hole in the ground at the root of a tree and dropped the shrew, then covered it with dirt. It was hard to dig in the frosty ground. She scraped with her claws until finally her prey was mostly covered with dirt. Her stomach growled.

"Sunpaw! Find anything?"

It was Falconwing. In front of him he had a small hare.

"Hardly," mewed Sunpaw. "I'm starving..."

Falconwing nodded, picked up his hare, and trotted away. Sunpaw's ears pricked up as she listened intently for a sound - the sound of prey. But nothing came. She smelled nothing except for the stale scent of the long-gone dawn patrol.

About a tree-length away she spotted a silver shape. It was Moonpaw. She looked tired and worn.

"Have *you* managed to catch anything?" Moonpaw meowed, seeing her coming. "*I* haven't except for a blackbird I buried back there." She nodded toward a mound of dirt.

"Just a shrew."

Moonpaw nodded. "Leaf-bare's finally setting in. I hope it doesn't get much worse. Snow will fall soon. The prey become thinner. Oh, how I wish I could eat another fat squirrel, like I did yesterday!" She smiled weakly, looking up at Sunpaw. "I hope you fare better than I - hunting-wise, of course."

Sunpaw licked her sister's ear and padded away. Through the half-frozen moss she caught a whiff of something. Ears pricked, she carefully walked through the dirt. It seemed to be coming from the ground. She had gone hunting with Stormfoot until near-sunhigh and had not eaten all day. It would soon be mealtime.

Soon the scent became strong enough to identify - rabbit. Sunpaw's mouth watered. She licked her lips hungrily, hunger clawing the inside of her belly furiously as if trying to escape.

Sunpaw followed the smell to a bush. Digging inside, she found a burrow. She drank in the scent - there were two young rabbits inside. Food. But once the elders, queens, and kits had eaten, surely there wouldn't be enough for her to have her fill.

Do not dare eat it, mewed a small voice inside her head. *The Clan must be fed first.*

Perhaps, though, if she *did* choose to eat it, then she would be strong enough to hunt for the Clan and be even more helpful... No one would ever have to know...

The young rabbits stared up at her with pitiful eyes. Sunpaw was ravenous. They could not go anywhere with her standing there over the burrow. They were practically asking to be eaten.

Sunpaw's hunger got the best of her. She gave them each a swift bite to the neck and gulped them both down. A sudden warmth filled her. She licked her lips. Then she could still bring back the shrew and not come back empty-pawed, she thought. She turned around and ran to the spot where she had buried it and picked it up.

Sunpaw dropped the shrew on the fresh-kill pile, not grabbing anything for herself.

She started to pad over to the apprentices' den when she came across Stormshadow.

"Sunpaw, are you hungry? There isn't much fresh-kill, but you may help yourself."

"No need," said Sunpaw, a little too quickly.

Stormshadow looked at her, ears pricked. Then he looked shocked.

"Sunpaw! Have you eaten already? You smell of rabbit!"

Sunpaw flattened her ears. "I-"

Stormshadow closed his eyes. "Follow me, Sunpaw," he mewed.

With horror she realized where the deputy was taking her. Maplestar's den lay inside the Highrock, and Stormshadow was leading her right to it. Stormshadow pushed through the ivy covering the entrance to the den, where Maplestar was, sitting in the corner by her nest, eyes closed.

She opened them when she heard the deputy coming. Her tail flicked.

"What is it, Stormshadow?" her bell-like voice mewed.

"Sunpaw has broken the warrior code," Stormshadow sighed with a sort of forced calmness, the slightest trace of a growl rising in his throat. "I caught the scent of rabbit on her as she entered camp."

Maplestar's eyes widened and she rested them on the apprentice.

"Sunpaw, is this true?"

Sunpaw flattened her ears again and stared at her front paws. "It is," she said quietly. "I was so hungry. I figured if I ate, then-"

"Enough," hissed Stormshadow. "We have no time for petty excuses."

"There is no need to be so harsh, Stormshadow," Maplestar meowed calmly. "She is an apprentice. However, she indeed must be punished."

Sunpaw's blood ran cold.

"You will take care of their elders for a quarter-moon," said

Maplestar, "And you will not go to the next Gathering."

Sunpaw did not look up. "What do I do for the elders, Maplestar?" she said softly.

"You will search their pelts for ticks, hunt for them, and clear away their dirt," Maplestar ordered.

Sunpaw's jaw dropped.

"Clear their dirt?" Sunpaw mewed in protest, glancing up. "You can't possibly expect me to-"

"You have broken the warrior code," Maplestar said firmly. "You will do as I say."

Sunpaw closed her eyes. "Yes, Maplestar," she sighed.

The Clan leader's tail flicked. "You may go," she said. "I must speak to Stormshadow. Go tell Emberfur what I have said."

Sunpaw sighed and left Maplestar's den.

Emberfur was in her den, chewing up a poultice. Seeing Sunpaw coming, she spit it out and looked up.

"What do you need?" she asked.

"I - I was put in charge of the elders," Sunpaw replied shamefully. She wished Emberfur would not have to hear that.

"Very well," Emberfur acknowledged. She went over to one of her leaf-wraps and pulled out another wrap full of some yellow liquid.

"Don't get this in your mouth," Emberfur mewed, wincing as she placed it in front of Sunpaw. "It's mouse bile. Put these on the ticks and they'll drop right off."

"Thanks," Sunpaw awkwardly, and walked away with it.

Sunpaw marched over to the elder's den. Littlestripe, Windpelt, and Buttonweasel stood talking together. Buttonweasel must have been

the oldest, and was definitely the strangest cat Sunpaw had ever seen. He was scraggly and brown with a very pointy nose, and his eyes pointed away from each other.

"Well, well. An apprentice," Windpelt observed wisely, her roan-colored fur bristling. "Maplestar sent you, did she?"

Sunpaw nodded.

"Oh good," said Buttonweasel. "I think I have some ticks I need taken care of..." He tilted his head backward to lick his pelt.

Sunpaw winced. "Sure," she said. She went over to Buttonweasel, who lay down so Sunpaw could clear his ticks. She placed her paws on his back and spread his fur apart at the roots.

"Back in my day," said Buttonweasel with a slight cackle, "The worst of the apprentices had to *eat* the ticks. I always say, Maplestar is too soft on you apprentices nowadays..."

Sunpaw wasn't sure how to respond as she dripped some mouse bile on the small insect and popped it between her teeth.

She searched Buttonweasel for some more and then decided she was finished. The other elders did not feel the need to ask, luckily, and were settling down for the evening.

Chapter 13

Moonpaw sighed. She had spent the last quarter-moon taking and cleaning out the elders' bedding. It had been tiring, but at least Buttonweasel had kept her somewhat entertained with his crazy stories. He had told her about the "Great Mouse Famine"- one of his most famous stories - and how apprentices had to eat elder's ticks as a punishment "back in his days." He also related on how he used to be a great fighter and hunter.

Her mind snapped back to the present. She was out hunting - or was meant to be - and had only caught a small, skinny mouse. Only a mouthful - or not even that. She shook her head crossly and trotted back to camp. She dropped her catch on the fresh-kill pile and padded to the medicine den. She popped her head inside the den.

"Emberfur?" she asked. The tortoiseshell she-cat turned from sorting herbs. The sweet and tangy scent of them drifted toward the apprentice.

"Yes? Oh hi, Moonpaw. Come for your herbs?" the medicine cat asked.

Moonpaw nodded. "Yes, thank you." Emberfur handed her the usual - a bundle of coltsfoot - and returned to her sorting. Moonpaw trudged out of the den and stared around the clearing, wondering what to do. Duskkit, Darkkit, Beaverkit, and Scarkit were playing outside the nursery with Littlerose, their mother. The kits were growing fast, and would have to be apprenticed in a few moons. They tumbled around the grass, pouncing on a dead leaf. Their squeals of excitement drifted towards her. She padded towards them.

"Hi," she mewed. The kits stopped and looked up at her.

"It's an apprentice!" Beaverkit, the smallest of the litter, squeaked. "A real apprentice!" His brother, Darkkit, cuffed him playfully over the ear.

"Well, yea. ThunderClan *does* have apprentices. And we'll be ones soon!" His eyes lit up. Scarkit pushed between them. He was the biggest of the four, and his ears twitched.

"We better grow up, kits," he huffed. "Or you three, I should say. I'll bet Maplestar makes me an apprentice before you because I'm so big and strong compared to you runts!" Littlerose gently pawed at him.

"Oh really?" Her eyes glittered in amusement.

"Scarkit's being bossy again!" Duskkit whined. "You should tell him off!"

Litterose laughed softly. "Alright. Scarkit, be nice!"

"Fine." He rolled his eyes. Moonpaw let her attention drift to the elders' den. She trotted over and pushed inside. *I'll just listen to one of Buttonweasel's crazy stories,* she thought.

"Well hello, young 'un," Buttonweasel rasped. The wall-eyed tom was sitting in his nest, his oddly pointed nose buried in his shaggy brown pelt. His head lifted, and he popped a tick between his teeth. Then he swallowed it. It took every ounce of willpower for Moonpaw to not comment or screw up her face in disgust.

"Hi, Buttonweasel," she meowed.

"Come for another about Buttonweasel the Great and Powerful?" he asked.

Moonpaw shrugged, positioning herself to sit in front of him. "Sure."

"Right," he began. "So the Great Mouse Famine wiped out every Clan cat in the forest except the Clan leaders."

"But you're still here," Moonpaw pointed out. "And the other elders." Buttonweasel glanced at Littlestripe and Windpelt.

"Well - they were lucky," he muttered. Then his expression brightened. He nodded. "Yes, yes, only the Clan leaders, and I of course, survived. Well, let's leave Littlestripe and Windpelt out of

the picture." The other elders grunted in agreement.

"I was a very, very strong and valued cat, so I couldn't die," Buttonweasel went on. "No, wait, I *did* die, but StarClan granted me nine lives. Plus, they didn't want me so they sent me to ThunderClan this time."

"Right," Moonpaw muttered. "This time?"

"Oh, yes, yes. RiverClan was the best. And I was the very best swimmer and fisher." He puffed his chest out proudly.

"You can swim?"

"Oh, sure, It's easy! Good for the soul, ya' know."

"Um, okay."

"Yes! Anyways, in RiverClan there was a Great Fish Famine! Wiped me and many other clean away! Oh, then StarClan was amazing! So many faithful Buttonweasels who perished..." He sniffed sadly for dramatic effect.

"WindClan favored me over every other cat in the forest. I became their deputy, ya'know. The Great Hare Famine wiped the old deputy off his paws. I saw him back when I was ShadowClan's medicine cat. Such a friendly cat, he was. I was a great medicine cat, one of the best. For example, catmint is used for deep gashes on the legs. Wonder if Emberfur knows *that* one, hm?

"My Twolegs *loved* me. I fought bravely with them and beat off the giant frog single-pawed. It would have eaten them! Ooh! That reminds me of the Great Frog Famine that almost wiped out the ShadowClan population. I hunted for them and saved the whole Clan all on my own. But then a snake bit my tail, and I died saving ShadowClan. And then I was reincarnated as a mouse in ThunderClan. Then I dreamt my way to StarClan and said, 'Bring back the mouses for ThunderClan! They need mouses again!' And good 'ol StarClan listened to my prayers that I prayed in StarClan. They brought mice back and gave me yet a new life in ThunderClan where I once again became a faithful deputy. Then Maplestar had to

come along and kick me out as deputy!" He snorted.

"But she's a good leader. Although, she does make me sleep in this smelly den." He sniffed and screwed his face up in disgust. "Must be you, young 'un. Ah, and I'm very pleased to say that I decided to save the Clans from the Butterfly, Shrew, Lizard, and Minnow Famines..."

"Very nice, Buttonweasel," Moonpaw sighed.

He nodded. "And then I met this lovely she-hare. She was so lovely that I decided not to kill and eat her. So I brought her back to camp and we played together. But then... she had two jackalopes. I asked, 'who's their fa-'"

"Moonpaw!" Swiftclaw called into the den. "Time for training!"

"Oh, good timing!" She hurried out of the den. But as she was leaving, she heard Buttonweasel telling Littlestripe the rest of his tale.

"Their father was a deer!" he meowed as Moonpaw hurried outside.

"We'll be battle training," Swiftclaw announced. Moonpaw nodded as they headed for the training hollow. But as they were trotting towards the hollow, Moonpaw couldn't but imagine what jackalopes looked like. *I'll have to ask him*, she decided. *What* is *a jackalope...?*

Chapter 14

Sunpaw trudged through the trees. She stopped at a small boulder and dug her claws into the snow-covered moss that spread over it. She tore it off and clamped it in her jaws, then climbed through the gorse tunnel and went to the elders' den.

"There you are," mewed Littlestripe with a yawn. "Fresh bedding, I see."

Sunpaw nodded reluctantly and set it down. She began to take out the soiled bedding when Buttonweasel spoke up.

"I was just telling your sister the story about the Great Mouse Famine," he rasped. "Who was it?" He cocked his head. "Was it... Starpaw?"

"Moonpaw," Sunpaw corrected him, beginning to push in the fresh bedding.

"Would you like to hear it?"

"I suppose," Sunpaw muttered, not wanting to be rude. But she didn't really listen as she started to check Windpelt's fur for ticks.

"So, seasons and seasons ago, when I was the RiverClan medicine cat, all the mice disappeared from all the territories..."

She poured mouse bile on the insect.

"All the cats died except the Clan leaders and I!"

She started searching again.

"So then StarClan sent me back..."

Sunpaw wasn't really paying attention anymore as she put down the mouse bile.

"And then the she-hare had four little jackalopes!

"Well, that's the story, then," he mewed. Sunpaw nodded a bit awkwardly, unsure what to say and wondering what a jackalope was.

That night was the Gathering. She and Moonpaw stayed in the den. Fogpaw and Beepaw had been picked to go. The frozen moonlight dripped into the den entrance as the two littermates sat in the back corner together, Forestpaw sleeping not far away.

"I wish I could've gone," meowed Moonpaw. "I *had* to talk back to Swiftclaw..."

"Oh well," Sunpaw sighed."You'll go next time."

Moonpaw didn't look pleased. *Oh, you've never been to a Gathering. That's right.* She didn't dare say it aloud to her sister. Moonpaw had curled up in her nest and was fast asleep. Sunpaw shook her head, pushing outside.

"Hey," Falconwing meowed from the den entrance. She jumped in surprise.

"Oh, hi, Falconwing..." she mumbled. The handsome warrior gazed kindly at her. Then he turned and padded off towards the warriors' den. Sunpaw shrugged and nosed her way out of camp. The warriors of StarClan were shining brightly, and the full moon shone down like a pale silver veil on her

"Sunpaw? Why're you still up?"

It was Forestpaw. Her shiny grey tabby coat glowed like white in the moonlight.

"I'm not tired," Sunpaw meowed quietly. "I'm not allowed to go the Gathering."

"Oh, cheer up," Forestpaw murmured with a yawn. "It's just this once."

Sunpaw shrugged and looked up. "StarClan is so large," she meowed

in awe. "And Silverpelt is so beautiful."

Forestpaw sat next to her and looked up as well. "I wonder what it's like up there," she mewed pensively. Her tail swayed behind her, the breath trailing from her nostrils turning into frosty vapor.

Sunpaw yawned. "I really should try to sleep," she remarked. "Maybe we should go back to the den. It's pretty cold out here standing in all the snow."

The thick white blanket did chill them. It was ankle deep. But Forestpaw shook all the frosty white particles off of her fur. "I'm actually not all that tired anymore." She shrugged. "It is a bit cold, though."

Sunpaw didn't know how long they stood there gazing at Silverpelt, occasionally letting a comment slip out, but soon Forestpaw stretched and yawned again.

"Yea, come on. It's much warmer in the den," she agreed. Sunpaw nodded and trudged after her, leaving paw-tracks in the icy snow.

When they got inside the den, they saw Moonpaw had fallen asleep in her nest and was breathing softly, a warm rhythm every time she inhaled and exhaled. Sunpaw settled inside hers and tucked her head inside her soft furry body and wrapped her tail around her. Closing her eyes, she found it much easier to fall asleep.

* * *

"Sunpaw, get up."

"Wha-? Leave me alone."

"*Sunpaw, get your lazy rump out of bed*!"

Sunpaw jolted awake fully and blinked in the sunup-light. She had been in the middle of a pleasant dream - a soft, lush forest. She had been hunting as a warrior. Disappointed to find out she was in fact still an apprentice, she hauled herself out of her nest.

Stormfoot looked at her with a sigh. "It never takes you this long,"

he muttered. "Oh well. Now come on."

It hadn't snowed overnight, but it was still cold and the ground still covered. Sunpaw walked with her mentor outside through the gorse tunnel and towards the training hollow.

"What're we working on today?" Sunpaw piped up.

"Practicing for your hunting assessment," meowed Stormfoot.

"My what?"

"Your hunting assessment," he repeated. "Before you become a warrior you must pass a hunting assessment. Today might be a good day to start preparing."

"But the ceremony must be a half-moon away at *least*," Sunpaw remarked, confused. "Why start now?"

Stormfoot paused and looked at her seriously. "It's very difficult," he meowed. "There will be an entire sunup-to-sunhigh dedicated to practicing the day before. But I want you to be the best warrior you can be."

Sunpaw beamed. "Okay," she agreed. "If you say so..."

When they reached the training hollow, Stormfoot planted himself near a tree stump and sat down.

"Alright, go ahead," he told her.

"By myself? When do I stop?"

"At sunhigh. But remember that the real assessment will be more of a competition. Work your way up so that you can pair speed with accuracy." His eyes glittered. "Now go."

Sunpaw dashed off into the trees. She was eager to make her mentor proud. Soon she slowed her pace so as not to scare off any prey.

The weak sun shone on the icy forest floor. Sunpaw's ears twitched

and the snow on them went flying. Then her ears pricked up and she caught the vague scent of magpie.

Instinctively she dropped into a hunter's crouch, turning her head until she saw it. It was pecking on a low tree branch. Locking her eyes on it, she slowly slid each forepaw forward one by one, inching closer to the bird with each pawstep.

She pounced and landed on one of the bird's wings. It let out a cry of alarm. With a swift bite to the neck, it went limp.

Sunpaw trotted over to where Stormfoot was waiting and dropped her kill at his paws. Then she tore off into another direction, the crisp, raw air tearing at her face. Towards the sandy hollow she scented the smell of RiverClan and freshly hunted fish. RiverClan was the only Clan that did not mind getting their paws wet and often hunted them, but ThunderClan did not; Sunpaw's stomach growled.

She thought of how happy Stormfoot would be if she brought back plenty of fresh-kill - even if it was in the form of fish. She trotted past the Sunningrocks and to the riverbank, her paws sinking into the wet sand and mud.

She waited at the edge of the river for something to appear. *Is this how RiverClan hunts?* She thought stupidly. At last, however, a dark shadow appeared just below the surface of the water. Without waiting another heartbeat, she plunged her forepaws into the water, feeling to see if she could catch a fish. One of her paws slipped on a slimy rock below and her nose plunged into the water. She came up sputtering, when she lost her balance and felt herself plummet into the icy waves below.

Sunpaw panicked as her head went underwater. Flailing awkwardly, she managed to grip a paw hold on a piece of driftwood and heave herself onto it. Her head broke the water and she gasped. The fish, of course, had swum away now as Sunpaw tried to paddle toward the bank - she was drifting toward RiverClan's side of the river.

"Look, Haretail! A ThunderClan 'paw fell into the river!"

A brown RiverClan she-cat with a rather scruffy, short tail looked at her apprentice half-interestedly.

"Where, Wormpaw?" she padded toward the cream-colored tom.

"Over there! Not even three fox-lengths from the bank!" the apprentice cried. Haretail's eyes widened as she saw Sunpaw, soaking wet and clinging onto the wood wildly.

"We got ourselves a *Drypaw*," Wormpaw scoffed.

"Oh come on, Wormpaw. That's not how a true warrior acts." She sounded like she meant it, but her eyes glittered with amusement. In a flash of fur the she-cat plunged into the water. Frozen with terror, Sunpaw was struck stiff. But she felt something strong churn up the water and her head break the surface. She was heading toward the ThunderClan side of the bank.

Sunpaw felt her paws touch solid, dry ground and she let out a sigh of relief. "Thank StarClan," she muttered, glancing around her to see who had saved her.

A sopping wet Haretail stood in front of her.

"Are you alright?" asked the RiverClan warrior.

Sunpaw nodded. "Why'd you save me? You're my enemy."

"The warrior code demands that each Clan should ensure the balance of the others," replied Haretail. "Surely your mentor taught you to do the same." With a curt nod she disappeared into the water again, and in a few moments turned up on the other side. She shook herself and water went flying everywhere.

"Stormfoot!" she mewed, seeing a figure in the trees behind her. "*Stormfoot*!"

The red tom came bounding out of the trees and ran up to Sunpaw, licking her furiously.

"What did you think you were doing?" he asked between licks. "What did you jump into the river for?"

"I thought I might be able to hunt some fish," Sunpaw mumbled, but it sounded even more stupid when she said it than how it sounded in her head.

"We need to take you to Emberfur," her mentor sighed, looking her over. "Thank StarClan you didn't drown! Follow me!"

What am I going to tell *Emberfur?* thought the apprentice. When they entered camp the medicine cat pelted up to them, almost as if she already knew.

"Come with me," she murmured.

Sunpaw went after her into her den where the medicine cat brought a bundle of herbs from her stores. She unwrapped it and handed it to Sunpaw.

"Eat it," she ordered. "It's feverfew."

Sunpaw glanced down at the little daisy-like flowers and leaves and gulped them down, shivering.

"Did you go into the river?" Emberfur eyed her seriously.

"Yes," Sunpaw admitted shamefully. "I was trying to see if I could hunt fish."

Emberfur nodded sympathetically. "I see," she meowed. "Only RiverClan cats are made to hunt fish, Sunpaw - especially in leaf-bare, when the river could have killed you from the cold had you stayed in there much longer."

Sunpaw started to feel a bit warmer and more numb as Emberfur went to go search through her herbs again.

"Juniper berries," she muttered, "for breath." She jumped down and gave them to Sunpaw. "Tell me if you don't feel better within a few sunrises," she said gently. Sunpaw nodded and headed out of Emberfur's den, licking herself in an attempt to dry off.

Chapter 15

The frigid winds blew. Moon after cold moon passed. Leaf-bare had come, although it was becoming less harsh. All four Clans were weak, and some cats did not survive the worst of the perilous season.

"ShadowClan is sad to announce that one of our elders, Morningclaw, hunts with StarClan, and is no longer with us," Timberstar meowed gravely. "Our remaining elder, Snuzzleberry, is recovering very well. We will mourn Morningclaw for moons to come." Timberstar nodded to the gathered cats and stepped back for another leader to speak. Maplestar stepped forward following the encouraging nods from the other Clan leaders.

Maplestar stepped to the front of the rock, dipping her head at the other leaders.

"ThunderClan is strong. All ill cats have been treated and are all on the way to recovery. We have three new warriors: Redflame, Tinyblossom, and Falconwing are full warriors of ThunderClan." Maplestar paused, letting what she had said sink on him as the other cats cheered for the young warriors. She continued, "Less than one moon ago, ShadowClan cats attacked our dusk patrol." Her meow turned into a yowl, commanding all cats to listen. "This will not be tolerated!" Mews of dismay rose from the gathered cats. Timberstar stepped forward and waited for the cats to quiet, then he spoke.

"I was not aware that my cats were on your side, but ThunderClan was on mine!"

Shocked mews rose from the two Clans. Stillpaw padded up to the ShadowClan deputy and whispered into her ear. Nightfoot's eyes grew wide and she nodded. She leaped up to Timberstar and whispered into his ear. Then she jumped down.

"It appears we have had a miscommunication of what had

happened. Stillpaw just informed me that a ShadowClan patrol was actually on the ThunderClan territory." He turned towards Maplestar, "I sincerely apologize. I will ensure that our warriors do not pass the borders again." He looked back down in time to see Ghostwhisker bowling over Stillpaw, pinning her down, hissing. Dark clouds started to cover the full moon, and he hissed once more and let her go. The cats were silent. Finally Dewstar stepped up.

"WindClan is strong from leaf-bare. None of our cats grew ill." She stepped back. RiverClan reported. The Gathering was over.

* * *

"How was the Gathering?" Buttonweasel was at the entrance of camp as the ThunderClan cats walked through. His cackle lifted their weary spirits. Bluepaw stepped forward, away from the other cats.

"Morningclaw didn't survive leaf-bare," Bluepaw meowed carefully.

"Awww... She was a nice little she-cat, wasn't she? Well, now she's in StarClan." He bowed his old mangy head. Then he lowered his mew, "I heard Maplestar talking about maybe making Forestpaw and Beepaw warriors soon, and maybe considering you because you fought those flea pelted ShadowClan warriors. Heh! And they call themselves strong!" He started padding towards the elders" den, and Bluepaw heard him muttering, "They think they are so strong and they call themselves warriors... They can't even take care of their elders and kits..." Bluepaw hurried away toward the apprentices den.

Bluepaw fell asleep beside Fogpaw. Sunup came, and she woke from a fitful sleep. She stretched and padded quietly out of the den. She headed for Emberfur's den to see if she could help with anything. Buttonweasel's words still rung in her head: *and maybe considering you, because you fought those flea-pelted ShadowClan warriors.*

"Good morning, Bluepaw!" Emberfur mewed to her.

"Hi Emberfur." She replied back, her jaws splitting into a huge

yawn.

"Could you check the elders for fleas and take Littlestripe catmint?" Bluepaw gathered the mouse bile and catmint and headed toward the elders den. A musty, rancid scent hung in the air, but the herbs and mouse bile blocked the scent. She padded in. Littlestripe and Windpelt were sleeping soundly. She put the bundles down and checked on Buttonweasel. Bluepaw bent down, and was swept into a vision.

She saw herself sniffing his fur. She pawed him, but he did not move. His brown fur had the same musty scent about it that she had thought she had smelled earlier. His shaggy brown fur was cold and he was stiff. Then she realized what happened. Buttonweasel was *dead*. The vision faded, but Bluepaw was still shocked as she awoke. Horrified, she ran to Emberfur, who was about to leave camp.

"Emberfur! Buttonweasel, he's - he's - dead." her eyes widened. Emberfur turned and ran toward the elders' den. Bluepaw turned the opposite way and fled out of camp. She raced past the dawn patrol, all the way to Snakerocks. She heard paws behind her, and ran faster. Finally she got to the rocks, and stopped, panting.

A soft sound came from under the rock, like the wind rustling through the trees, but harsher. Stepping back a little, she suddenly realized that adders were all out now, growing warm again after the cold moons of leaf-bare. A cat yowled, and Bluepaw saw Redflame bite the adder's head right before it sank its fangs into her leg.

"Bluepaw! Are you okay? What happened?" Redflame nudged her gently away from the rocks where other deadly adders lived. She nodded in response, too shocked to speak.

"Go to Emberfur, and tell her what happened." Bluepaw nodded and hurried to camp. Bluepaw walked to the medicine den.

"E- Emberfur?"

"Yes?" Emberfur looked at Bluepaw worriedly. "Here, take this juniper berry and poppy seed and go to sleep."

"O-okay... but how did you-?" Bluepaw stuttered.

Emberfur cut her off, "The patrol came back and said you ran, so I figured that you were shocked about Buttonweasel. He *is* okay though." Her mew already was soothing Bluepaw, who nodded her head, and walked out of the den. Redflame was waiting outside for her.

"Are you okay?" His mew was tight.

"Yeah. I'm fine." She turned as Vinestripe padded quickly out of the warriors' den.

"Bluepaw? Are you okay?" Vinestripe started licking Bluepaw as if she were still a kit. Bluepaw shrugged her off.

"I'm fine, just tired." She had licked up the poppy seed in Emberfur's den, and was starting to stagger around sleepily.

"Here Bluepaw, lean on me," Redflame mewed kindly. Vinestripe nodded her head gratefully. They managed to get to the apprentice den, and Bluepaw collapsed into her soft moss nest. Redflame started licking her shoulder, the soft rhythmic strokes putting her into a peaceful sleep.

"Bluepaw, Bluepaw wake up!" Muddypelt called into the den. "You are going on the dawn patrol. Get up." Bluepaw lifted her head to the sound of her mentor's voice. Stretching, she wriggled out of her warm nest and joined him outside. When they were out of the camp, Muddypelt stayed further back along with Bluepaw.

"Maplestar has been thinking about making you a warrior soon. Do you think you are ready?" His mew was stern, yet soft as he asked her.

"I, er - I think - I sort of know I'm ready, Muddypelt," Bluepaw sputtered, not knowing what to say. Muddypelt dipped his head.

"I will speak to Maplestar then. You will probably be assessed on the same day as Forestpaw and Beepaw. Now, let's catch up to the patrol."

By sunhigh, the patrol was back at the camp. Bluepaw had caught two water voles and she dropped them into the fresh-kill pile. Then she took a small mouse from the pile, and gulped it down, thanking StarClan for the prey. She heaved herself into her nest, and curled up. Exhausted, she fell into an uneasy sleep.

It was just before the next sunup when Muddypelt woke her.

"You are going to be assessed today," he had hissed into the den. Bluepaw let her jaws split into a huge yawn. Then she lined up next to Forestpaw and Beepaw.

"Today, you three will be assessed on your hunting skills," Stormshadow told the three apprentices. "Your mentors think that you have had adequate battle training, as well as hunting practice. Your assessment begins now!" The apprentices padded out of camp, each going a separate direction. Bluepaw opened her jaws, letting the scent of the forest flood into her mouth. Then she scented a squirrel. She dropped into a hunter's crouch, and stalked the prey silently. The squirrel was busy searching for nuts and did not smell or see Bluepaw until it was too late. Bluepaw leaped neatly into the air, and killed the small prey with a swift bite to the neck. She scraped dirt over it, and started looking for more fresh-kill.

At sunhigh, the assessment was finished. Bluepaw retrieved all of her prey. She had gotten a squirrel, a blackbird, two plump voles, and a hare that had wandered across the WindClan border. Forestpaw had gotten two fat water voles and a large crow, and a pigeon, which Bluepaw guessed would count as about five mice. Beepaw had managed two mice and three squirrels. Maplestar talked to the three mentors for awhile and finally padded out of her den.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting!" Maplestar yowled from Highrock. "Today, three apprentices will take their places in the warriors' den." Maplestar looked toward Beepaw.

"I, Maplestar, leader of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend

him to you as a warrior in their turn." Beepaw was beaming.

"Beepaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend the Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Beepaw bowed his head. "I do," he mewed solemnly.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Beepaw, from this moment on you will be known as Beecloud. StarClan honors your bravery and justice, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan." Maplestar rested her chin on his head, and in turn he respectively licked her shoulder. The cats started chanting, "Beecloud! Beecloud!" Maplestar turned to Forestpaw.

"Forestpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend the Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Forestpaw looked into Maplestar's eyes. "I do," she mewed.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Forestpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Forestfrost. StarClan honors your courage and helpful motherly ways, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan." Maplestar rested her chin on the apprentice's head, and in turn Forestfrost respectively licked her shoulder. Again the Clan chanted the new warrior name, "Forestfrost! Forestfrost!"

Bluepaw was frightened. She was going to be a warrior before her littermates, yet it felt normal to be separated, ever since she was little, her littermates had left her out of things. *Like the night when we were kits, Moonkit had snuck out if the nursery with Fogkit. They told Sunkit, but made sure I didn't know.*

"Bluepaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend the Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Bluepaw glanced at Redflame, then at Maplestar. "I do," she mewed boldly and respectively.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Bluepaw, from this moment on you will be known as Bluestripe. StarClan honors your speed, hunting skills and bravery, and we

welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan." Maplestar rested her chin on her head, and in turn she respectively licked her shoulder. The Clan lifted their voices, and mewed.

"Bluestripe! Beecloud! Forestfrost! Bluestripe! Beecloud! Forestfrost! Bluestripe! Beecloud! Forestfrost! Bluestripe!" Bluestripe turned toward Redflame, and her littermates. Redflame was the first to speak.

"Great job, Bluestripe!" he purred loudly. Fogpaw shouldered the warrior out of the way, playfully growling.

"Great job, Bluestripe! I'm going to miss you in the apprentice den." Her other littermates swarmed around her, and she barely had a chance to glance back at Redflame, purring, before Sunpaw, Moonpaw, and Fogpaw led her toward the beaming and proud Vinestripe and Robinfeather. At sundown, she left her littermates and padded to the entrance of camp to sit vigil with Forestfrost and her brother.

Chapter 16

Moonpaw sat in her nest. She was happy for her sister, and yet, jealousy rooted in her heart. It was like some dark force she couldn't rid herself of. She knew she should be happy. And she was. Proud, even. But deep down she knew her littermates should have been up there with Bluestripe, receiving their warrior names as well. She deserved it. Sunpaw, Fogpaw; they all did. And yet Bluestripe was made a warrior before them, even when they had all been apprenticed together, just because she had happened to be on the patrol when the ShadowClan cats crossed the border and attacked. Moonpaw scowled. She would find Swiftclaw and show her she should be made a warrior, too. And Sunpaw and Fogpaw. They certainly deserved it.

But fear also pricked at her. What if she wasn't made a warrior because she couldn't breathe as well as the others? What is she didn't pass her assessment? What if she *wasn't* ready? *No, I am,* she told herself firmly. *And I'll be better than Bluestripe.* She shook her head. She was being selfish. She would be made a warrior soon, even if her sister had been made one before her. She growled at herself and padded out of the den. She spotted Swiftclaw at the fresh-kill pile and hurried over.

"Do you think I'm ready to do my assessment soon?" she asked. Swiftclaw turned to face her and dropped the vole she was eating.

"Perhaps," her mentor sighed. "Be patient. Your time will come. But I can't rush your training. Now let me finish this vole so we can go out and *train*."

"Okay," Moonpaw mewed cheerfully. Under her breath she muttered, "you sure can make an effort to take me out, though!" She picked a mouse from the pile and sat down beside Beecloud. She was more happy for him than her own sister. He was older than her and deserved to be made a warrior sooner.

"Hey," she greeted him. He looked up at her, finishing the last

morsel of his own mouse. He immediately smiled when he saw Moonpaw.

"Oh, Moonpaw! Hi!" he meowed warmly, flicking his tail to beckon her to sit beside him. She did, and started on her own mouse.

"How's being a warrior coming?" Moonpaw asked, taking a bite of her mouse. "Great," Beecloud replied without much enthusiasm. Moonpaw looked at him.

"Don't you enjoy finally being a warrior?" She cocked her head in confusion. Beecloud shrugged.

"Of course, but... It gets kind of quiet and lonely in there without a cat like you," he muttered, staring at the ground.

Moonpaw smiled. "I'll be with you someday," she whispered, giving him a playful poke with her muzzle. He purred

"How's having Bluestripe out if the den been for you?" Beecloud asked. Moonpaw didn't move from him as she replied.

"Well... I'm just a little sad we weren't made warriors together," she admitted. "But having her out of the den is just fine!" she joked. "Just as not having you annoying furball always padding after me is helping me get a good night's sleep!" Beecloud purred all the louder.

"But I wouldn't pad after any other cat, Moonpaw," he murmured under his breath. Moonpaw stared at him gratefully.

"Moonpaw!" Swiftclaw's commanding yowl made her jump.

"Gotta go," she called to Beecloud as she bounded toward her mentor.

"Ready?" Swiftclaw asked, already making her way to the entrance. Moonpaw nodded and hurried after her.

She breathed in the forest-scents as she padded after her mentor. The trees were alive with newleaf's life. Birds chirped in the trees, mice squeaked under dry, fallen leaves. The air was crisp and frosty, for the weak morning sunshine had not yet warmed the

forest. *It's amazing! I could stay here forever! I-*

"We'll be hunting right now." Swiftclaw's mew broke her thoughts. "And then battle training later." Moonpaw nodded absentmindedly as Swiftclaw studied her. "Run along, catch some prey," she told her apprentice.

"Alright." Moonpaw trudged into the trees. Then she stopped, tasting the air. Nothing. She headed for the WindClan border. As she neared the border line, she stopped again, parting her jaws to drink in the scents that flooded her mouth. *Mouse. Perfect.* She scanned the undergrowth for a ruffle of fur, a twitch of its tail, a tiny pink nose, anything. *There.* It was nibbling on a berry among the dry, fallen, cracked leaves.

Moonpaw dropped into a crouch, sliding each paw forward silently on the forest floor. She straightened her tail, wagged her haunches, and lept. She landed squarely on the mouse and gave it a swift killing bite to its neck. She gazed at her fresh-kill proudly as she scraped dirt over it to fetch later.

She was heading for the ShadowClan border when she heard a yowl behind her. She whipped around, ears pricked, and raced towards the sound. It was coming from the WindClan border! Her paws thrummed over the ground as she dashed across the forest floor. She puffed and heaved in breaths, coughing, as she slid under a bush, watching the border. A WindClan hunting patrol was on ThunderClan's side of the border, and a rabbit hung from one of the cat's jaws. They were bickering about something Moonpaw didn't quite catch.

"You're on ThunderClan territory!" she yowled as she slid out of her cover. The WindClan cats whipped around, snarling.

"Oh, yea? What are you gonna do about it?" a red tom sneered. "You're just an apprentice!"

"Shut up, Brightpelt," a grey she-cat sighed, stepping up to Moonpaw. "Run home," she spat in Moonpaw's face. The apprentice screwed up her nose.

"Alright, I will!" she retorted, turning away. She would warn Swiftclaw, and she would fetch an attack patrol. Teeth sunk into her tail and started dragging her back. She yowled in pain and surprise, turning around. Brightpelt was dragging her towards the border.

"Let me go!" she spat. Another jolt of pain pulsed through her tail and she clenched her teeth.

"No! You'll fetch an attack patrol!" Brightpelt protested. Feeling helpless she went limp, letting Brightpelt drag her across the border. As the teeth sunk even more into her tail, she caught the eye of the third cat - a grey and white mottled tom, and only saw pity and regret. Her own eyes pleaded for help, but the young warrior said nothing.

"Get to your paws," Brightpelt growled as they crossed back into WindClan territory. Moonpaw struggled to her paws, coughing still from her mad dash to the border. She sighed, calmly following after the patrol into camp. As they reached the camp's entrance, Brightpelt nudged her through roughly and called for Dewstar.

Moonpaw faced the WindClan leader boldly as he padded from his den.

"Been sniffing around our territory, young one?" Dewstar asked calmly.

"No-"

"Yes, precisely. She was nosing around our territory, catching mice!" Brightpelt growled. "Can you *believe* her?"

"Let me deal with this, Brightpelt." Dewstar turned to Moonpaw once more. "You will stay here, because you have blindly violated our borders. You will sleep in the apprentices' den until we say you can leave. Ravenfrost-" the grey and white mottled tom stepped forward from the back of the patrol- "please escort her to the apprentices' den."

"Yes, Dewstar," Ravenfrost meowed. He led Moonpaw to a little cave weaved from tall grasses, and stepped in. "Here you are. The

other apprentices will make you a nest."

"Why are you doing this?" Moonpaw whimpered. "You guys are such fox-hearted liars! You know you were the ones trespassing!"

"Moonpaw. I need you to listen to me," Ravenfrost whispered, pushing her deeper into the den. "No one's gonna hear this, because the apprentices are out training, but you need to listen."

She sat down calmly, wrapping her tail around her paws. "I'm all ears," she muttered. "What do you want?"

The young warrior took a deep breath. "I'm going to help you get out of here tonight."

Moonpaw's tail twitched in excitement. "Anything to get me out of this stupid camp!"

"I'm going to need you to bring a mouse to the border in three days' time. I'll bring my own. We can exchange them, be allies."

Moonpaw frowned.

"Why in the world would I meet with an *enemy* who captured me for no reason?" She raised her voice. "Why?"

"Shh!" He flicked his tail over her mouth. "B-Because..."

"Why?" Moonpaw pressed.

Ravenfrost rolled his eyes. "The tension between WindClan and ThunderClan... Maybe if we agreed to be allies, then we could make our Clans see peace."

Moonpaw cocked her head. Her rage vanished. He sounded so sincere, and she wanted to believe him. *He* is *going to get me out of the camp*, she reasoned. She gazed at him. *And kind of handsome...* She shook her head. What was she thinking? He was from an enemy Clan!

"Okay," she agreed. "I'll bring one then. But you have to get me out of here."

Ravenfrost brightened and smiled so big that Moonpaw couldn't help but purr. He suddenly licked his chest fur in embarrassment. "And I will," he murmured. "Thank you."

Moonpaw sighed and nodded, settling down in the dust, and waiting for sleep to take her, even though it was only sunhigh.

"Psst! Moonpaw!" Ravenfrost peered into the den. He had conveniently been set on guard outside the den. Moonpaw lifted her head, her eyes blurry from sleep. Since she had arrived, she had stayed in the apprentices' den, drifting in and out of sleep until the apprentice returned. They had protested her arrival, but could do nothing about it. They had grudgingly fetched her some moor grass for her nest, and didn't take much care in making it. Now they all slept soundly in their own warm nests.

"Is it time?" she whispered. Ravenfrost nodded. She got to her paws and quietly and tiptoed out of the den. Ravenfrost met her with a purr.

"Ready?" he murmured. Moonpaw nodded, her paws tingling with excitement. She was going home!

"Okay. Follow me." Moonpaw followed him out of camp. They slipped past the guards and hares across the moor. As they bounded over the grasses, Moonpaw started to lose her breath. *No, no, not now!* She gulped and pushed on after Ravenfrost. He stopped at a bush and settled down. She sat down beside him, her flanks heaving with ragged breaths.

"You okay?" Ravenfrost asked, sounding concerned. "Can you breathe?"

"I- I can!" Moonpaw snapped. Then she dipped her head apologetically. "Sorry." A fit of coughing engulfed her. She heaved in breaths and calmed herself until her breathing was almost back to normal. "My-my lungs are too small," she rasped. "I can't take in enough air when I work myself too hard."

"Oh. I'm sorry," Ravenfrost licked his paw and squeezed his eyes shut. "This is all my fault," he whimpered. "We ran up here too fast-"

"It's not your fault, Ravenfrost," Moonpaw whispered. "I was born with these lungs, and have learned to deal with it." Ravenfrost stiffened.

"I'm just.. I..." he trailed off, gazing into Moonpaw's blue eyes with his own. "You *will* turn up?" he whispered.

Moonpaw nodded. "I never thought I would agree to this, but yes."

Ravenfrost kneaded the ground with his paws. "Okay. Good. You see, I've been waiting for the opportunity to ask somebody from ThunderClan, and I couldn't do it at a Gathering or someone would hear..."

"I should go home, Ravenfrost."

"Oh, yea. I'll walk you to the border." Moonpaw got to her paws. Ravenfrost guided her across the moor, their pelts brushing occasionally by mistake. As they reached the border Ravenfrost touched his tail-tip to her shoulder and wished her a good night. Moonpaw suddenly felt uncomfortable. She blindly raced across the border, careful not to run too fast as to upset her lungs. She stealthily pushed into camp and tiptoed to her nest in the apprentices' den. There she flopped down, letting sleep take her.

Chapter 17

Sunlight shone through the bracken that warm morning. They had nearly reached the Fourtrees when Stormfoot spoke.

"What do you smell?"

Sunpaw pricked up her ears and breathed deeply. Her eyes widened.

"WindClan," she muttered. "And it's rather recent."

Stormfoot seemed interested as he tasted the air.

"Hm," he meowed softly. "You're right."

"What do we do?" Sunpaw looked at her mentor.

"We tell Stormshadow and Maplestar," he decided. "At once." He turned on his heel to walk toward camp. Sunpaw followed him.

"Stormshadow!" Stormfoot mewed as they entered. The dark cat pricked up his ears. "Sunpaw has news for you."

"WindClan," the apprentice announced breathlessly. "I scented them in our territory, near Fourtrees."

Maplestar padded out of her den; she had apparently been listening.

"We'll send a patrol there," she mewed. "I will take Lavenderpelt, Falconwing, Oakleaf, Forestfrost, Fogpaw, and Sunpaw. Stormshadow will stay with the rest of you. Are we agreed?"

Rumbles of agreement ran through the crowd, and the cats that had been called ran to the ThunderClan leader.

"Are we going to attack?" asked Littlestripe.

"Only if we have to," replied Maplestar calmly.

The seven cats padded through the gorse tunnel and headed north. Maplestar looked determined as each paw steadily touched the earth, one by one. As they passed the Owl Tree and neared Fourtrees, Maplestar flicked her tail and the cats advanced.

"They were here," she confirmed quietly as they went. The smell of WindClan filled their nostrils as they crossed the border. Sunpaw could catch the vague fear-scent on her brother as they passed a hollow. The scent of the enemy Clan was steadily growing stronger as they neared the WindClan camp.

Suddenly, Maplestar halted. A tear in a clump of bracken had appeared in the entrance of the camp. She flicked her tail, breathed deeply, and entered.

Sunpaw edged through behind Forestfrost into the camp. Some kits who were playing in the grass by a heather nursery stopped as their mothers pushed them inside. Spiritheart, the cream-colored WindClan deputy, stopped.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. "Have you come to bring a message?"

"Where is Dewstar?" Maplestar asked. "I wish to speak with her."

Spiritheart bowed his head. "Very well," he meowed, and padded into one of the dens. Dewstar walked out, looking serious.

"We have come to discuss trespassing," Maplestar growled. "We caught WindClan scent on our territory."

"Did you?" Dewstar narrowed her eyes.

Oakleaf twitched his tail irritably.

"Yes," Maplestar meowed, her hackles raising. "Explain yourself."

"If it is a fight you want," Dewstar went on dangerously, "It is a fight you shall get. How many warriors have you with you?"

Maplestar's tail flicked. Clearly, she did not want Dewstar to know - it would increase their chances of being outnumbered.

"I have not come to fight."

"Any intrusion into my territory is a cause to fight! Attack!"

Maplestar's eyes fixed on the WindClan leader, fur sticking straight up on her neck, and she pounced.

Suddenly, WindClan warriors and apprentices went to their leader's aid. A grey tabby tom apprentice named Runningpaw pounced on top of Sunpaw. She thrashed under him and clawed at his face furiously. He twisted and aimed for her belly, but Sunpaw leaped out of the way, barely missing him. Breathing heavily, she turned around and locked her jaws onto his tail.

He yowled in agony and panted on the ground. A ginger tom named Owlwing was on top of Fogpaw, claws unsheathed. Fogpaw gasped and tried to keep his neck away from the large cat; Sunpaw ran for it and caught Owlwing by surprise. Biting his muzzle, she ran away over to Fogpaw.

"Th-Thanks," he muttered softly.

Sunpaw pressed her muzzle against him gently and turned around - but something happened. A cat even larger than Owlwing dug his claws into her - Clawednose. Sunpaw screeched and tried to throw him off, bowling him over with her paws - but she felt teeth sink into her ear and keep their hold there.

Sunpaw gasped; she felt a warm liquid pour down from where he had bit her. She struggled, but he was much stronger than her.

She felt both an agonizing pain and joyous relief as she felt Clawednose being pulled off of her; she ran a paw over her left ear, which now had a significant tear in it. She glanced around to see who had helped her; Falconwing was now fighting with Clawednose.

Maplestar flicked her tail. "ThunderClan!" she yowled. "Follow me! The battle is over! We have not come to fight here!"

Each warrior and apprentice stopped their fighting and followed Maplestar, who now sported a cut over her eye, out of the tunnel and through the WindClan moor. When they reached their territory again it was like each of them breathed a sigh of relief as they started toward camp.

"How are you?" asked Falconwing, panting and limping slightly. There was a bleeding scratch on his chest. "How's your ear? You should go see Emberfur."

"Could be worse," Sunpaw breathed. Her ear ached, but she did not want him to think she was weak - but instead his amber eyes looked into hers sympathetically.

As they reached camp at dusk Sunpaw padded into Emberfur's den. As usual, she was making some sort of poultice and glanced up at Sunpaw she entered.

"Good StarClan," she muttered. "Here." she grabbed some cobwebs and poppy seeds and began to bandage Sunpaw's wounds. "Here, eat these." She gave her the poppy seeds. "They'll soothe your pain."

"Thank you," said Sunpaw respectfully, dipping her head.

"Sunpaw! I have good news!" It was Stormfoot.

"What is it?"

"You and your littermates are going to be made warriors!" he announced. "Very soon! She said your assessments will start at dawn."

"Really?" Sunpaw's eyes widened, but she was very tired as she felt the cool mist of sleep begin to collect around her.

"Go to sleep," purred her mentor softly. "Maplestar tells me you fought like a warrior today."

Sunpaw returned his praise with another purr and gave him a lick before setting off for the apprentices' den. She padded inside, where Moonpaw was snoring softly and Fogpaw was curled up, but not asleep. Sunpaw could see his deep brown eyes blink every now and

then.

"Did Grasspelt tell you?" she asked him as she tucked her paws underneath her in her nest.

Fogpaw's lips parted in a sheepish smile. "Of course she did," he murmured. "I'm nervous, aren't you?"

Sunpaw's ears twitched and she nodded. There was a thought that pricked at her mind as she closed her eyes - how Moonpaw would complete the assessment with her disorder.

"Sunpaw. *Sunpaw*."

Sunpaw's head shot in the air out from her curled up body. "Wha-? Is it dawn?"

"You bet," Stormfoot sneered playfully. "Now *up*. Fogpaw and Grasspelt are out already."

"Alright, alright," yawned the she-cat, stretching and flicking her tail in slight annoyance. "So how does this work?"

She followed Stormfoot across camp and through the gorse tunnel.

"It's quite simple," meowed her mentor. "Hunt and bring back as much fresh-kill as you can. You finish at sunhigh. Don't forget your techniques. This determines whether you're ready to become a warrior or not."

Sunpaw felt a slight shiver run down her spine as she gulped and nodded. She wondered what it would feel like to see Moonpaw and Fogpaw be made warriors while she sat watching, needing more training - she was bound to be made fun of. When they reached the sandy hollow, Stormfoot stopped.

"Start here," he told her. "I'm going back to camp and will report to Maplestar on how well you did."

"Okay," agreed his apprentice. She watched as Stormfoot padded in the direction of camp, then began to go the other way.

She caught the scent of rabbit almost immediately. Making sure she was upwind, she eased into her hunters' crouch and followed her nose. She could barely see it, nibbling on the weeds and grasses, until she pounced.

She was satisfied to see it was good and plump - a gift from StarClan in the prime of newleaf. Raking dirt over it with her claws, she went off toward Sunningrocks.

The vague stench of RiverClan drifted over from the river. She tore after a vole and killed it with a swift bite to the neck. She had been hunting at Sunningrocks for a while now, every now and then bringing her catch to the sandy hollow where her rabbit lay. She had caught a good amount of prey that morning, and she had expected it would be sunhigh soon.

Sunpaw scented Stormfoot as she was carrying a mouse she had just killed back to the hollow. He looked quite pleased. He licked her shoulder.

"It's mealtime," he said. "The assessment's over."

"Thank StarClan," sighed Sunpaw weakly. "I don't know if I'll be able to carry all my fresh-kill back to camp by myself, even."

"I'll help you," Stormfoot offered. When they reached the sandy hollow, he picked up some of her prey and they headed toward camp.

Stormfoot put all Sunpaw's fresh-kill in a pile. Fogpaw was done with his as well, and his pile was roughly larger than Sunpaw's. But she also noticed that Moonpaw was standing beside Swiftclaw near Stormfoot, with no fresh-kill pile in sight.

"Well done, apprentices," meowed Stormshadow and Maplestar together. "Your mentors will now decide whether you are worthy of becoming warriors."

After a few heartbeats of watching them whisper together, the turned to face their apprentices.

"Fogpaw," announced Grasspelt, "I am happy to tell you that you are

ready to become a fully-fledged warrior of ThunderClan."

Fogpaw beamed at his mentor, and Stormfoot turned to Sunpaw.

"You as well," he purred. "I know you will do great things."

Maplestar signalled the end of the assessment and Sunpaw ran over to Moonpaw.

"Why didn't you do it?" she demanded.

Moonpaw looked startled. She licked her paw and brought it over her ear. "S-Swiftclaw said she'd give me a little longer," she mewed nervously. Then she halted. "And don't think I've failed," she snapped.

"I didn't think you did," Sunpaw meowed quietly.

Maplestar jumped onto the Highrock at sunset and flicked her tail. "May all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting!"

Stormfoot ushered her to the front of the crowd, where Fogpaw and Moonpaw went to join her. Her heart was pounding - she felt like an excited kit - she looked at her two siblings and saw they looked ecstatic, but Moonpaw a bit worried.

"It is time to initiate two new warriors," Maplestar began. "Sunpaw, Fogpaw - come forward."

Sunpaw and her siblings felt their faces grow hot underneath their fur as they stepped forward. It was time.

First, she turned to Sunpaw.

"I, Maplestar, leader of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as a warrior in her turn.

"Sunpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Sunpaw stared at her paws. "I do," she mewed softly and solemnly.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Sunpaw, from this moment you will be known as Sunstorm. StarClan honors your swiftness and accuracy in battle, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

Stormfoot looked at his apprentice, his eyes dancing full of joy. Vinestripe and Robinfeather purred at the triumph of their daughter.

"Fogpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Fogpaw looked into Maplestar's eyes and murmured, "I do."

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Fogpaw, from this moment you will be known as Fogcloud. StarClan honors your loyalty to your Clan and responsibility, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

"Sunstorm! Fogcloud! Sunstorm! Fogcloud!" yowled and cheered the crowd below.

"Now the apprentices and new warriors will greet their Clanmates," mewed Maplestar. "Then the warriors will proceed to their vigil." She flicked her tail and the crowd dispersed.

"Amazing job," purred Stormfoot proudly. "You'll be an amazing warrior."

"Congratulations!" mewed Bluestripe, licking her sister's ear. Falconwing rubbed against her. "Congratulations," he purred.

Sunstorm turned around and joined her siblings with her parents. Bluestripe, Vinestripe, and Robinfeather greeted their kits.

"It's time for your silent vigil," mewed Robinfeather very seriously. He licked their faces with a gentle, swift stroke. "Sunstorm. Fogcloud."

"We won't disappoint you, Father," replied Fogcloud. "We'll be the

best warriors there ever were."

"You haven't forgotten your vigil, have you?" Stormshadow let out an amused purr. "It's nearly time for you to start. It ends at dawn."

"Of course," mewed Sunstorm.

The two new warriors took their spot near the center of camp and gazed at the beautiful Silverpelt above as the rest of the Clan crawled into their dens for the night.

Chapter 18

Bluestripe woke from her sleep. Stretching, she padded out of the warriors den. It was nice having her littermates finally warriors. Moonpaw had disappeared for a few sunrises, but was back at camp, and safe.

"Bluestripe!" Redflame purred as he padded up to her. "Want to go explore the territory?"

"I would like that a lot," Bluestripe meowed happily. Together they padded out of camp. The sun was just rising, making the sky a beautiful arrangement of reds and oranges.

"Bluestripe?" Redflame paused, his pelt getting warmed in the weak sun. "It's a beautiful day," he remarked, twitching his ears. He shrank back a little. "I don't want this to sound weird, Bluestripe, but... I think you're beautiful too."

Bluestripe's ears flattened and she felt her fur grow hot around her face. "Thank you." She purred very slightly.

"'Course." Redflame let out his breath slowly. "Let's go back to the hollow." Redflame purred as they padded there. As they slipped through the gorse entrance, Tinyblossom looked up from sharing tongues with Fogcloud, who had just ended his night vigil.

"What happened to you, Redflame?" Tinyblossom teased her brother. "Been going on a romantic stroll?" Beside her, Bluestripe felt Redflame's pelt grow warm, along with hers, with embarrassment.

"Yeah, well what about you and Fogcloud?" Redflame muttered. Across the camp, all of the cats were either sharing tongues or eating fresh-kill. Bluestripe watched as the kits tumbling around the nursery, and she watched as Littlerose scolded the kits when they got too rough. Tulipkit and Iriskit were sparring with Scarkit,

Darkkit, Duskkit, and Beaverkit; the latter of the two litters were nearly apprentice age.

"Don't worry about it, Bluestripe," Tinyblossom mewed once the two toms had gone to join the hunting patrol.

"Thanks, Tinyblossom." Bluestripe meowed, padded away towards the warriors' den.

"Hi Bluestripe!" Sunstorm called as her sister entered the den.

"Hi Sunstorm - have you seen Moonpaw?" Bluestripe glanced around camp, but didn't see her other littermate. Sunstorm shrugged and Bluestripe walked out of the den.

"Bluestripe! Come over here and share this fresh-kill with me." Bluestripe turned around to see Moonpaw beckoning her over to the fresh-kill pile.

"Okay. One minute, Moonpaw." Bluestripe cast one last glance at the gorse tunnel entrance, then turned and stalked over to Moonpaw. Moonpaw had a plump vole and took a bite, then pushed it to Bluestripe.

About a half-moon later Bluestripe and Redflame sat under an oak tree near the RiverClan border, wind rushing softly through the leaves and making them rustle. Redflame looked rather antsy, fiddling with a ball of moss on the soil between his paws.

"You alright?" she asked him.

"Yea. I was thinking about what I said a half-moon ago. Well, I was wondering..." he hesitated.

"I'm your friend," Bluestripe insisted. "You can tell me anything."

"Well, that's just it." He turned to look at her, looking nervous. "Do you think that maybe... We could me more than friends?"

Bluestripe purred. "I was hoping you might ask that." Her fur bristled with slight embarrassment. "Like, mates?"

"Well, if that's okay with--"

Bluestripe flicked her ear and pushed her muzzle into his cheek. "Of course it's okay," she told him.

Another half-moon passed and Bluestripe woke with a horrible bellyache that made her feel like she had eaten crowfood the day before. Heaving herself to her paws, she trudged over to Emberfur's den, where she found the wise medicine cat grooming herself.

"Emberfur?" she mewed. "I have a bellyache. Maybe you could check it out for me."

A knowing glimmer passed in Emberfur's eye. "Lie on your side," she ordered.

Bluestripe felt awkward but obliged, rolling over on her side as the medicine cat gently probed her belly with soft, delicate paws. In a few moments she stood up with a confirming grunt.

"Just as I thought," she nodded. "Bluestripe, you're going to have kits."

* * *

Just after they finished she finished her vole, the hunting patrol came back into the camp. Redflame raced over to Bluestripe, and after dropping his fresh-kill into the pile, he happily pushed his muzzle into hers. The two cats entwined their tails, purring.

"Guess what, Redflame!" Bluestripe couldn't keep the secret any longer.

"What?" He tilted his head.

"I'm going to have kits!" Bluestripe bursted out joyously.

"That's wonderful! I'm so excited. What should we name them? How many-"

"Mouse-brain," Bluestripe playfully cuffed him on the ear. "Just be patient." Her soft eyes gazed into his warm hazel ones.

"Okay. Just make sure you are in the nursery soon enough. I should get Emberfur, and tell her you need to be in there, and-" Bluestripe put her tail across his mouth.

"Emberfur knows already. I'm fine, honestly."

"Alright. If you insist. Oh - and you better be careful next to Twolegplace; there's a loner there. She wasn't too happy with our border patrol."

"I'll be okay, don't worry." Bluestripe assured him.

"Bluestripe," Stormshadow called out from behind her, "I want you to go on a patrol with Muddypelt, Laceleaf, and Oakleaf. You will be patrolling around Twolegplace to check out the loner." Stormshadow whisked around to fetch Laceleaf and Muddypelt.

"Promise you'll be careful?" Redflame called to Bluestripe before she left.

"I promise." She licked the top of his head. The patrol walked out of the camp, and headed to Twolegplace.

"I hope that loner isn't *too* unhappy, or else we might have to fight." Laceleaf's comment made Bluestripe uneasy. *I know it's still early, but I have to think about my kits above fighting a she-cat!*

The patrol reached Twolegplace soon enough, and from the corner of one of the dens, a yellow-gold she-cat stepped out, eyes narrowed and hissing.

"What do you mangy flea-pelts want with me?" the she-cat snarled to the patrol. "I told you to stay away from me!" Stepping forward, she hissed at the patrol. Suddenly, between the trees behind the Twoleg nest, Bluestripe heard tiny mews, like from kits. *Kits*! This she-cat had kits! *Where is her mate? Shouldn't he be here protecting her and his children?* The she-cat turned and raced back to the source of the mews. The patrol could see her start to lick her mewling balls of her. The ThunderClan cats were shocked.

"You have kits! Are they okay?" Laceleaf asked, fear-scent blocking the other forest scents in the air. The patrol stepped closer to the

she-cat's nest.

"Yes. I have three. I'm sorry, I really am," she mewed to the patrol. Sighing, she sat down. "I - I shouldn't have gotten mad at you. I didn't know what to think. You are the wild cats I have heard rumors about. They told me your kind kills kits. But you don't seem the kind. By the way," pausing she looked into Bluestripe's eyes, hunger and despair showing plainly, "my name is Willow. My mate left me when I was kitting," she continued softly, "I don't have any Twolegs, and - and I get so hungry sometimes that I don't have any milk for my kits." Willow's mew shook.

"We can get you some food - that is, if you like mice and squirrels," Bluestripe offered before the rest of the patrol could speak.

"But what would Maplestar say?" Muddypelt spoke up.

"Maplestar? What a strange name." Willow's small mew stopped the patrol from arguing any more.

"Those are warrior names. I am Bluestripe, this is Muddypelt, Laceleaf, and Oakleaf," Bluestripe introduced her Clanmates calmly to the loner. *Of course,* she *wouldn't know*.

"Oh. I'm sorry I said that," Willow swallowed. "Why wouldn't... *Maplestar* like it if you brought me food?" She tilted her head, utterly confused.

"Well, it's kind of hard to explain. There are four Clans, and we all have territories in the forest. Each Clan catches food and protects its borders. The Clans usually chase loners and kittypets off their territories, and since you were so close to ours, we came to make sure you weren't invading," Oakleaf explained to the inquiring cat.

"Oakleaf," Muddypelt hissed, "You're telling her too much. How do you know she's not a rogue spy, or something else? We don't know this cat."

Bluestripe and Willow ignored him, Oakleaf dipping his head in passive acknowledgement.

"Oh. Well, could you even get me *one* thing?"

"Of course we can. Oakleaf, we can go hunting and give Willow enough fresh-kill for another sunhigh," Laceleaf decided before the other cats could talk.

"Alright. We will hunt. Just make sure we have some for the Clan," Oakleaf agreed. "We'll be right back, Willow." He turned and stalked back into the forest, the rest of the patrol following.

By the time they were finished hunting, they had enough fresh-kill for most of the Clan. The patrol headed back to where Willow was waiting. Bluestripe set down her fresh-kill in front of Willow - a mouse and two water voles. Willow's eyes looked longingly at the fresh-kill.

"M-May I have some?" Willow looked up at the patrol hopefully.

"Of course, Willow. It's all yours." Bluestripe nodded to the three pieces of fresh-kill, plump and tender during the green season. "I hope you're used to eating this kind of food," Bluestripe added, encouraging Willow to eat.

"Oh yes. When my mate was still here he would hunt just across the road," Willow purred as she took a bite of the water vole.

"The *road?* What's a 'road'?" Oakleaf asked Willow.

"The big black hard surface over there, where the cars drive." Willow looked at them curiously.

"Oh, you mean the Thunderpath, and monsters!" Muddypelt *mrowed* with laughter. "We had better be getting back to camp. Maplestar might be looking for us," he added, and, nodding toward Willow, stalked back towards the camp. When they entered, Bluestripe headed toward Maplestar's den. Poking her head inside, she asked,

"Maplestar? Can I talk to you?"

"Yes, Bluestripe? What is it?" Maplestar turned to start grooming again."Well, when we were on the patrol, we met the loner named Willow. She has three kits, and I was wondering..."

Chapter 19

Moonpaw marched up to Swiftclaw, her fur bristling.

"Is this it? Is this what you wanted?" she snapped at her mentor. She didn't even care if she was being disrespectful. Swiftclaw didn't *deserve* her respect anymore.

Swiftclaw looked startled. "Excuse me?" she growled. "What makes you think you can treat your mentor like this?"

"You didn't let me even *try* to pass the assessment!" Moonpaw exploded. "It was bad enough seeing Bluestripe made a warrior before me and my littermates, but to see the *rest* of them becoming a warrior before me is just... I just can't believe you would do this to me! Don't you think I would have liked to become a warrior with my littermates instead of being left in the dust?" It had been about a moon since the rest of her littermates had become warriors, and she finally had the courage to confront her mentor about it. It was about time she was made a warrior, and Bluestripe had been a warrior for so long that she was already expecting kits!

Swiftclaw gazed at her calmly, as if she was bored with the apprentice. "I have my reasons," she finally meowed.

That was it. Moonpaw couldn't deal with her stubborn mentor anymore. She knew she had completed her training, had enough time of being an apprentice to become a warrior. And yet Swiftclaw simply just wouldn't let her pursue her dreams.

"Tell me," she demanded. "Tell me why I can't be a warrior!"

She stared at Swiftclaw, expecting her to be annoyed or frustrated with her. But she looked... troubled, and almost sad.

"I'm sorry, Moonpaw..." Swiftclaw whispered. "I-I was afraid for you. I knew you wanted to be made a warrior with your littermates, and I wanted that for you as much as you wanted it. I really did. But

with your lungs..." she trailed off.

"What about my lungs?"

"I-I thought you wouldn't be able to complete the assessment with your lungs. I thought you would tire too quickly. I'm so sorry, Moonpaw. I care about you, much more than you think. I was afraid you wouldn't be able to be a warrior. But you're right. You deserve being a warrior much more than most." And with that she got up and stalked away towards Maplestar's den.

Moonpaw was speechless. She had had no idea that her mentor actually cared for her. She had thought that was only like an annoying tick or bur in Swiftclaw's pelt. But she was pleasantly surprised at being wrong.

"Moonpaw!" Swiftclaw called for her as she emerged from their leader's den. Moonpaw hurried over.

"Yes?"

Maplestar appeared from behind her mentor.

"It's about time this brave apprentice is made a warrior," Maplestar murmured. Moonpaw's pelt tingled with excitement. She was going be assessed! But her excitement turned to curiosity when Maplestar padded up the Highrock to address her Clan. Swiftclaw cast Moonpaw a quick pleased and apologetic glance before taking her place beneath Highrock.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here beneath Highrock for a Clan meeting!" their leader yowled. And then it struck her. *I'm going to be a warrior* right now! she thought happily. *Without an assessment!*

It was early morning; no patrol had left yet, but Stormshadow had been in the middle of organizing the dawn patrol when Maplestar had yowled the address to her Clan. Moonpaw stood proudly next to Maplestar on the Highrock, her blue eyes gleaming with pleasure as she saw Bluestripe emerging from nursery, Redflame hard on her paws, and Vinestripe and Robinfeather padding out of the warriors'

den to sit beside Sunstorm and Fogcloud, who had been sharing a vole at the fresh-kill pile, probably cold from the night before. Moonpaw saw Bluestripe look around sleepily, and how her eyes lit up in excitement when they met Moonpaw's.

As the Clan gathered beneath the Highrock, Maplestar started the ceremony.

"This is something that should have been done awhile ago," she began, her pleasant mew drifting over the Clan like honey. "Moonpaw should have been made a warrior long ago. Her lungs have never prevented her from being a loyal, hard-working apprentice, I'm sure they won't keep her from becoming the best warrior she can be. She has proved she can be a worthy warrior of ThunderClan, with or without an assessment." Maplestar gazed at Moonpaw fondly, and returned her attention to the Clan as Moonpaw puffed out her chest proudly.

"I, Maplestar, leader of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. She has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend her to you as a warrior in your turn.

"Moonpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Moonpaw's paws tingled with excitement. This was it! She was going to become a real warrior of ThunderClan, and her lungs never stopped this moment from happening.

"I do," she finally meowed solemnly, raising her head to stare at the Clan she knew and loved.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name," Maplestar continued. "Moonpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Moonwhisper, as a reminder of your lungs and how they never stopped you from becoming a warrior. StarClan honors your courage and loyalty, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

"Moonwhisper! Moonwhisper!" her Clan cheered, her kin loudest of

all. But instead of feeling the joy she thought would feel, her pelt crawled with uneasiness and shame. Maplestar had said she was loyal, and yet Moonwhisper had gone and met Ravenfrost the past few nights, and she had grown close to him; closer than she was to Beecloud. She shook her head as she padded down the Highrock to her cheering Clan. *I* am *loyal!*

"Congratulations!" someone meowed warmly. Beecloud. There was so much love in his voice Moonwhisper felt ashamed for Ravenfrost. Suddenly she realized that perhaps she and Ravenfrost were more than just allies...

"Thank you, Beecloud," Moonwhisper murmured. Beecloud pushed his cheek against hers, purring. Moonwhisper felt tense being so close to him again and headed toward her littermates.

"Yay!" Bluestripe squealed like an excited kit. She licked Moonwhisper's ear, purring. Sunstorm and Fogcloud pressed close to either side of her, making her feel like a kit again, surrounded by her littermates without a care in the world. Lastly, Vinestripe and Robinfeather approached her, their eyes glowing with pride and love.

"Moonwhisper, we couldn't be more proud," Vinestripe whispered, purring. She and Robinfeather each gave her ear a quick lick before retreating to their nests in the warriors' den. That reminded her that she would be sleeping in the warriors' den now!

"Good job, Moonwhisper. May StarClan bless the life ahead of you." Moonwhisper turned to see Maplestar standing behind her. She stifled a purr.

"Thank you so much!" She dipped her head in respect.

Maplestar nodded in response. "You may go about your day, Moonwhisper, and have your first taste of freedom. But as the sun starts to set, you better be here for your vigil."

"Yes, Maplestar. Thank you." Maplestar was padding to her new den when Moonwhisper heard Stormshadow calling her.

"Moonwhisper! Can you join Strongheart's border patrol?" Moonwhisper trotted over.

"Sure," she mewed happily. Stormshadow nodded.

"Good." He turned to Strongheart, who was standing beside him. "Along with Moonwhisper, take... Weaselnose, Sandfur, Lavenderpelt, and - Swiftclaw," he decided.

"Yes, Stormshadow," Strongheart meowed.

"And you better patrol the WindClan border," Stormshadow added. Strongheart nodded, heading for the gorse tunnel, fetching the other cats out of the warriors' den on the way. When everyone in the patrol was set, they exited camp and headed for the WindClan border.

Moonwhisper's heart thumped in her chest. *Will I see Ravenfrost?* As they neared the border, Moonwhisper caught sight of a WindClan patrol. She searched the patrol for the familiar grey and white pelt, and was both pleased and horrified to see that Ravenfrost was indeed with the patrol. *What am I going to do?* she wailed inwardly. Then, taking a deep breath, she calmed herself.

"Strongheart," she meowed. He turned to look at her.

"Yes?"

"I think I scented WindClan on our side of the border a little ways back, by a bush," she lied. "Can I go check it out? I'll meet up with you later, if you want."

"Sure, Moonwhisper," he agreed, to her relief. "We'll keep patrolling the border, but catch up when you can."

"Okay, I will," Moonwhisper assured him, and turned around to start to head back the way they came.

"I never scented anything back there," she heard Sandfur mutter as she hurried off. Before Moonwhisper reached the bush, she veered off into a clump of bushes right on the border. The WindClan patrol was heading her way. As they neared, she heard Ravenfrost meow,

"I think I smell ThunderClan in those bushes over there."

"Then go check it out!" another cat growled, pushing Ravenfrost ahead of the patrol.

"Alright, alright," Ravenfrost muttered, padding towards the bush where Moonwhisper was waiting. He looked around quickly, making sure no cat was watching him, and slipped into the bush beside Moonwhisper.

"Moonpaw!" he greeted her warmly. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm Moon*whisper* now," she purred. "I had my warrior ceremony today. And we were out on patrol, so I slipped away using to same excuse you did. Anyways, I had to see you now, because tonight I sit vigil." Ravenfrost's eyes lit up.

"That's great, Moon*whisper*!" He licked her silver ears. Suddenly his gaze darkened. "I-I can't go on like this," he whispered. Moonwhisper's heart plummeted.

"Wha-what do you mean?"

He gazed at her, his icy blue eyes locking with her own. "I can't see you anymore."

"Why?" Moonwhisper's mew caught in her throat.

"Because I'm worried," He gazed at her pleadingly. "That maybe I'm growing too close to you. I had intended us to be allies to protect our Clans, but..." She rested her head on his shoulder.

"Moonwhisper, I think I love you."

"And I need you. But we could never-"

"We *have* to. I couldn't live with myself if I couldn't be with you. I worry about you every second of the day. That's why I'm going to join ThunderClan."

Moonwhisper gasped the shock. "But you can't! You can't leave your life to be with me!"

Ravenfrost pulled her closer with his tail, and settled down beside her. She did the same, curling up next to him and closing her eyes.

"I can, Moonwhisper. And I will."

Moonwhisper opened her eyes to stare at him. "I love you," she whispered. Ravenfrost purred, resting his head next to hers. He said nothing. But the way he had looked at her, Moonwhisper knew that he loved her more than words could say. He suddenly lifted his head.

"Will - I mean, will you - would you want to be with me as much as I want to be with you?" he stuttered.

Moonwhisper purred happily. There was nowhere else in the world she would rather be than with Ravenfrost. "Yes." Ravenfrost licked her ears affectionately and drifted to sleep. Moonwhisper nudged closer to him and tucked her head under her paws. Outside the bush, clouds had started to cover the early morning sun, and a slight drizzle descending on them.

Moonwhisper woke to Ravenfrost's rhythmic licking on her head. It was still drizzling, and Moonwhisper found her pelt was covered with little droplets of water. She stood up, shaking them off. She slipped outside the bush and tilted her head towards the sky. It was almost sundown. She had just enough time to get back to camp and announce Ravenfrost's arrival before her vigil.

"We gotta go," Moonwhisper murmured as Ravenfrost pushed his way out of the bush and stood beside her. He nodded.

"Right. And do you think Maplestar will take me in?" he asked hesitantly. "What if she drives me off? What would I say to my Clan as-"

"Shh..." Moonwhisper pressed against him. "I'll make sure she doesn't. And - and if it comes to it, I will join your Clan if I have to."

"But your littermates..." Ravenfrost objected. "I wouldn't want to be the cause of you leaving them."

"But I'm the cause for you leaving your Clan, Ravenfrost. Sometimes

it's okay to make sacrifices." Moonwhisper purred as Ravenfrost pressed his cheek against hers.

"Lead the way," he murmured. Moonwhisper plodded through the trees back to ThunderClan camp. She was looking forward to seeing how her Clanmates would react - but also terrified. They might think he betrayed his Clan. They might drive him off. They might accuse Moonwhisper of things she never did.

When they reached the gorse tunnel, Moonwhisper didn't hesitate as she slipped through to camp, Ravenfrost right behind her. As he squeezed through, the eyes of the other cats stared at him. No cat said a word as Moonwhisper headed for Maplestar's den and called her name.

"Maplestar!" she called softly. The light-brown she-cat appeared at the entrance. When she saw who had called her, her eyes lit up.

"Moonwhisper! You're okay! Where were you?"

"I found this cat trespassing," she explained, hoping Maplestar would believe her. But her leader's eyes narrowed.

"It took you from sunup to sundown to find him? And bring him back?"

Moonwhisper dipped her head. "I can explain."

"And so you will. Inside my den. Now."

Moonwhisper followed her leader into her den, Ravenfrost's fear-scent quite evident. But he followed without a word. Moonwhisper admired his courage.

Maplestar sat down in the middle of the den, curled her tail neatly around her paws, and motioned for Moonwhisper and Ravenfrost to sit in front of her.

"Explain."

Moonwhisper took a deep breath, thinking of how she could lead her leader to believe she had actually taken a whole day bringing

this "trespasser" to her. "I was on the dawn patrol," she began. She was going to make this as real to what actually happened as possible. But she was going to have to lie - to her *leader* - for Ravenfrost's and her own sake. "And we were patrolling the WindClan border when I scented a WindClan cat on our territory, by a bush. I asked Strongheart if I could check it out. He said I could. I found this trespasser here in the bush," she flicked her tail towards Ravenfrost, "and he asked me something very important. I discussed it with him for awhile and decided it was safe to lead him into our camp. I checked to make sure he wasn't a spy, or if his Clanmates were waiting to ambush. They weren't." She looked at Ravenfrost expectantly and nodded to him.

"I... I would like to join ThunderClan," he meowed boldly. Maplestar opened her jaws to respond and then closed them.

"Why?" she finally asked. "Has WindClan forsaken you?"

"N-Yes," he stammered. "They have driven me out b-because they hated my kin, and thought I was like them." Ravenfrost glanced at Moonwhisper, and she flicked her ears to tell him his lie was reasonable.

Maplestar rose to her paws. "I admire your bravery for coming here, young warrior. Do you have a name?"

"Yes. Thank you. And it's Ravenfrost. So can I join ThunderClan?"

Maplestar looked thoughtful. "I'm sorry WindClan drove you out. But it's not my problem, and you are not welcome here. Run home."

"Maplestar, but-" Moonwhisper objected.

"No. He cannot stay." At that moment Moonwhisper's heart seemed to shatter. She dipped her head, and Ravenfrost did the same.

"Fine. I hope you will miss me, Maplestar," Moonwhisper growled.

Chapter 20

Maplestar leaped onto the Highrock and yowled the summons.

"I almost forgot," Falconwing remarked. "It's time for Littlerose's kits' apprentice ceremony."

He and Sunstorm took their seats together near where Littlerose's kits were. There were three toms - one grey tabby, one black, and one brown tabby - and a grey she-kit.

"Kits, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed," Maplestar began. Turning to the grey tabby, she meowed, "Forestfrost, you will be mentor to Scarpaw."

Forestfrost's eyes lit up as she touched noses with Scarpaw.

"Laceleaf," she continued, as she flicked her tail toward the grey she-kit, "you will be mentor to Duskpaw."

Laceleaf padded up to the apprentice and touched noses with her.

"Falconwing, you will be mentor to Beaverpaw." Falconwing touched noses with the brown tabby.

"Emberfur, you will be mentor to Darkpaw." The medicine cat touched noses with the black tom and soon the ceremony was over.

At sunup Sunstorm awoke to find Falconwing waking up his new apprentice.

"Oh, hi," he meowed in greeting as he saw her coming. "Want to come training with us?"

"Sure," Sunstorm purred.

"Wake up, you lazy lump," Falconwing yowled amusedly. Beaverpaw stirred and stretched, blinking his dark eyes open.

"Time to go? Already?"

"Yep. Now get up; the territory isn't going to tour itself."

Beaverpaw hauled himself to his paws and padded after the two warriors, the wind blowing through his tabby fur.

When they had rounded the borders and headed back to the sandy hollow Falconwing stopped. "Alright, Beaverpaw. What do you smell?"

Beaverpaw sniffed the air. "Vole," he meowed, running his tongue around his lips. "Oh, Falconwing, can I try and catch it? Please?"

"Alright, go ahead," Falconwing shrugged, and the apprentice dashed off through the bracken.

"He's going to be a great warrior," purred Sunstorm, "with you to teach him."

"Well... I guess so," he replied modestly. "I'll try."

Sunstorm bumped her head against his. "Don't be silly," she mewed.

Soon Beaverpaw came running over. "It ran off," he panted. "Why don't you show me how to do a hunter's crouch?"

Falconwing stretched. "In a bit," he answered.

"You guys are so cute together," Beaverpaw purred with laughter and padded off with his nose in the air, poised to smell.

Sunstorm was not sure how to respond to his remark, and she felt her whiskers twitch with embarrassment. "Let's go show him that crouch," she told him.

Falconwing grunted with amusement as he walked after Sunstorm. She noticed, as she walked, that he did not seem to care that Beaverpaw had suggested that they were mates.

At sunhigh Sunstorm headed toward the fresh-kill pile and picked out a quail, heading over towards Bluestripe, who was near the

nursery. Her sister looked tired and rather pained.

"Everything alright?" Sunstorm asked her. "How are they coming along?"

"My kits?" she yawned, stretching. "Oh, it's hard. But I know it will be worth it."

"It certainly will." Sunstorm purred. "Has Emberfur been seeing to you?"

Bluestripe nodded. "Redflame won't stop asking me how I'm feeling," she added. "I keep insisting I'm fine, but..." she purred happily. "Oh, well. I know he'll be a wonderful father."

Sunstorm licked her littermate's ear and trotted over to where Falconwing was sitting. Fogcloud and Tinyblossom sat nearby, and they kept casting glances at both of them as they ate their fresh-kill. Sunstorm guessed they were thinking along the lines of Beaverpaw and she wondered how long they had thought so.

"Ignore it," Falconwing muttered, as if he had read her thoughts. "Don't worry, it'll blow over. I mean, I guess you *could* say they have a point..."

Sunstorm was not sure how to reply. It seemed most of her littermates already had mates, and her parents were probably expecting her time to come soon, too, but she was not sure. For one moment she thought about what it would be like to have kits of her own, and seeing them grow into strong, brave warriors...

She watched with amusement as Darkpaw helped Emberfur sort herbs. Every time he would hand her one, she would tell him the name.

"This is chervil - right?" he asked her, handing her the leafy green shoots.

"No, no - that's fennel. I know they look rather similar. Chervil helps with bellyaches and things like that, and fennel is for aching hips."

Darkpaw nodded as he passed her the herb. "Fennel," he repeated,

trying to make sure he remembered. "For aching hips."

"Buttonweasel's eyes are hurting again," Emberfur told him. "What herb are you going to bring him?"

"Celandine," Darkpaw meowed confidently. "For damaged eyes."

"Right. Now take him some. It's the yellow flowers wrapped in the beech leaves over there."

Darkpaw held his head high as he scooped up some of the celandine in his jaws and headed off toward the elders' den. Emberfur looked after him proudly.

After he had brought the herbs to Buttonweasel, Darkpaw headed toward Sunstorm. He flicked his tail and mewed a friendly greeting.

"Hi Sunstorm," he mewed. "Emberfur told me she's running low on borage leaves, but she says I should go with a warrior. Could you come?"

"Sure," Sunstorm replied, and stood up. "I'll be back," she told Falconwing, and brushed out of the bracken tunnel with Darkpaw.

"Now, Darkpaw," began Sunstorm casually as they padded through the trees, "Where can we find borage leaves?"

Darkpaw's eyes lit up. "They grow in forest areas," he told her. "Let's look by the sandy hollow."

He and Sunstorm talked as they reached the hollow, which was not far from camp, and the apprentice sniffed the air. "There's some over there." He flicked his tail ahead and they walked toward it until he spotted a fuzzy green plant with delicate indigo flowers growing from it.

"Borage leaves," he told her as he began to bite off some of the larger leaves. "I think they're for nursing queens."

"Sounds right to me," Sunstorm nodded. "I think I saw Emberfur used those on Littlerose once."

"Great!" Darkpaw picked up the herbs and they headed back to camp together.

At moonrise Sunstorm curled in her nest, the moon shining into the warriors' den. She woke up around moonhigh to the sound of the bracken tunnel rustling - someone was coming through.

She lifted up her head to notice a slender grey body coming out of the tunnel.

"Moonwhisper! What are you doing out of camp?"

She looked startled. The scent of fox dung wafted into Sunstorm's nose. "What happened?"

"I went hunting around sundown and got in a fight with a fox," she meowed, perhaps a bit too quickly. "Unfortunately I stepped in the place where it made its dirt."

"You smell horrible." Sunstorm wrinkled her nose. "You ought to give yourself a good grooming before you come in here, Moonwhisper."

Her sister smiled sheepishly, licked her paw, and drew it over her ear. "Alright, alright," she sighed. "Don't wake up the others by your complaining."

"Did you really fight with it since moonhigh? You look quite unhurt."

Moonwhisper paused in licking her chest. "I rested for a while, and my scratches must have healed by then," she shrugged. "You're so nosy, you know that?" She sighed and finished her grooming, crawling into her nest and closing her eyes.

Sunstorm wasn't sure if she believed her.

Chapter 21

The sun broke through the clouded sky, showering shafts of light through the warriors' den. Bluestripe woke and stretched. She weaved her way around her sleeping littermates, and padded outside to look for her mate. She saw him talking to Tinyblossom, one of his littermates. She saw Tinyblossom lick his ear and point her tail in her direction. Then she got up and padded away. Redflame whisked around to greet her, his eyes blazing with joy.

"Hi Bluestripe! How are you feeling? Do you need Emberfur to check on you?" Redflame looked at her worriedly.

"I'm fine. they won't be born for another moon and a half." Bluestripe sat down next to her mate and started grooming his rumpled fur.

"How are *you* doing? You spend so much time worrying about me that you can't even groom!" Bluestripe *mrowed* in laughter. He licked her ear affectionately, then nodded to the fresh-kill pile. They padded over, their pelts brushing. Redflame chose a vole, and Bluestripe took a sparrow that the dawn patrol had just dropped off in the pile.

"Maplestar said it would be okay if I hunted for Willow, since she doesn't know how to very well," Bluestripe mewed.

"But she's a loner!" Bluestripe put her tail over his mouth.

"She has kits she has to look after." Redflame's gaze softened.

"Alright, just take me with you, okay?"

"Okay. We should get going then. It's been awhile since I saw her." The two cats padded out of camp. Bluestripe headed toward Twolegplace to hunt. By the time they met again at the edge of the forest, they had caught enough prey for Willow and about half of the Clan. Burying most of it, Bluestripe and Redflame each took

some fresh kill for Willow. The she-cat was grooming herself at the edge of the Twoleg nest when she noticed them.

"Bluestripe! Hi!" Willow called out.

"Hi, Willow. Redflame helped me hunt for you," Bluestripe set her prey by Willow's nest, and flicked her tail for Redflame to do the same.

"How are the kits doing?" Redflame asked.

"I guess they are alright. They've grown so much since the last time you visited."

"What are their names?" Bluestripe thought out loud.

"I'm not sure yet. I haven't had much time to think about it." One of the tiny kits tumbled out of the nest, mewling for milk. Willow went over and led it back to the nest, signaled for the two Clan cats to follow, and let the kits suckle.

"I think I'll name them Patch, Flint, and Acorn," she mewed after a moment of thought.

"Patch, Flint, and Acorn. What great names! In a Clan, kit names end with 'kit, so Patch would be Patchkit, Flint would be Flintkit, and Acorn would be Acornkit," Bluestripe informed her.

"Well, we had better be going now. Maplestar might need us on a patrol," Redflame mewed. "We'll come back next sunhigh if that's okay with you."

"Of course it is! I never have cats to talk to," Willow remarked.

"Bye, Willow. Bye, Patch, Flint and Acorn!" Bluestripe mewed.

"Good bye Bluestripe and Redflame!" Willow licked her kits' heads happily.

For another moon, the two cats brought prey to Willow and her kits. Bluestripe knew her own kits would be coming soon, and started staying in the nursery more and more. Her belly was

swollen, and Redflame made sure she was okay. One morning, Bluestripe was restless, and couldn't get any more sleep. *It can't hurt if I go out of camp and see Willow, can it?* She padded out of camp, hoping no one saw her. She started on the way to Willow's nest, and reaching the edge of the forest a sharp pain rippled through her body.

"Willow! Willow, come quick," Bluestripe gasped. She knew her kits were coming, and soon.

"Bluestripe? Are you okay - oh my! Your kits! Follow me," she meowed gently as she led Bluestripe to her nest.

"Move out of the way, kits." Her kits shuffled to the side. Bluestripe laid down on her side. Another ripple pulsed through her body. She shrieked.

"Just take a big breath, Bluestripe. You're okay, just take big breaths," Willow soothed her, stroking her side with her tail. Bluestripe gulped for air, her sides aching.

"You're doing fine. Patch, fetch me a stick." Willow's mew was taut, like she was remembering how tough it had been to have kits. Another pulse, another screech.

"Here they come - Bluestripe, just take a big breath." Bluestripe nodded grimly, and took the stick from Patch who had just returned. Another pulse. Bluestripe bit down of the stick, feeling it splinter in her mouth. A wet bundle fell onto the moss.

"Just one more, Bluestripe, big breaths. Flint, Patch, start licking her kit to keep it warm." A last ripple shook Bluestripe, and another wet bundle slithered onto the moss.

"There. All done. You have two healthy kits, Bluestripe. A silvery blue tom, and a beautiful dark ginger she-cat." Willow swept the kits toward Bluestripe's belly to start suckling.

"I'll take you and your kits back to your camp once you rest a bit," Willow offered.

"Thank you," Bluestripe murmured. "Why don't you stay with me

once I get back? Your kits would be safe too."

"Maybe. I'll think about it." Willow had had her kits keep the new kits warm as Bluestripe rested.

"Willow, I need to get back," Bluestripe mewed once she woke up.

"Okay. I can carry one of your kits for you if you want." Willow grabbed the scruff of the she-kit, who squirmed around, mewling. Bluestripe picked up the tom. Patch and Flint followed, with Acorn following, bouncing along. As they padded through the forest, Willow finally mewed through a mouthful of fur.

"I'll stay with you, Bluestripe, if you think your Clan would be okay with it." Bluestripe nodded. They reached the thorn barrier and almost ran into Redflame.

"Bluestripe! Where were you? You should have-" He stopped when he heard the kits mewing. "You had your kits?" Bluestripe nodded. He raced off to get Emberfur. Bluestripe collapsed onto the ground, the other cats coming out from their dens to see what was happening. Her kits started mewling again, and Emberfur brought out a ball soaked in water and borage leaves.
"Here. Eat, Bluestripe, you must be starving." Emberfur pushed the leaves in front of her, then grabbed a vole from the fresh-kill pile. She noticed Willow when she returned.

"Hi, are you the cat who helped Bluestripe with her kits?" Willow nodded.

"My name is Willow." Then she pointed to her kits with her tail. "And those are Flint, Acorn and Patch."

"I'm Maplestar. Nice to finally meet you." Maplestar padded out of her den when Emberfur finished talking.

"Hello, Willow. Bluestripe told me a lot about you. Would you like to stay here in ThunderClan?"

Willow's eyes shined.

"I would like that very much. You must be Maplestar, right?"

Maplestar dipped her head.

"Would you like your name to be changed to a warrior name? And your kits?" Maplestar asked Willow.

"As long as I stay Willow, anything can go after it," Willow purred. "My kits' names are Patch, Flint, and Acorn." Maplestar dipped her head, then turned and leaped onto Highrock. Maplestar motioned Willow to her den to talk in private.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting," Maplestar yowled from Highrock. "Willow is a loner who lived at the edge of the territory, near Twolegplace. She and her kits have expressed desire to join the Clan."

Mews of both protest and agreement ran through the crowd.

"I have spoken to Stormshadow, and we both agree to make this queen a warrior," she continued, ignoring the interjections that had erupted from the throng of cats. "Under ordinary circumstances I would make her an apprentice for a short while first, but she has kits to care for and I find it suitable that we give her her warrior name now and some guidance after her kits have been apprentices." Maplestar sat, her eyes fixed on the sandy she-cat.

"I, Maplestar, leader of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this cat. She will be guided to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend her to you as a warrior in her turn.

"Willow, do you promise to uphold the warrior code as best you can and defend your adopted Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

The she-cat looked rather startled at this question as she carefully placed her kits on the ground and looked up at Maplestar. "I do," she said shakily at last.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Willow, from this moment on you will be known as Willowtuft. StarClan honors your joining ThunderClan, and we welcome you as a full warrior of our Clan."

Maplestar turned to her. "By tradition, a new warrior stands in a silent vigil the night after their ceremony," she explained. "I shall have an apprentice make a nest for your kits in the nursery."

"What are their names?" put in Lavenderpelt.

"Patch, Flint, and Acorn," Willow mewed proudly.

"In the Clan, their name ends with 'kit until they are apprenticed," Grasspelt mentioned. "When they're apprenticed, it ends in 'paw until they receive their unique warrior name."

"Well," Willowtuft looked at her kits, her head tilted, "Patchkit, Flintkit, and Acornkit then."

"How old are they?" Vinestripe asked.

"Five and three quarter moons. When are they apprenticed?" Willowtuft asked Vinestripe.

"At six moons, so not too long yet," Vinestripe purred. "Thank you for helping my kit, Bluestripe - she might have died if you hadn't."

"Bluestripe is your kit?"

Vinestripe nodded her head. The shadows in the camp began to lengthen, and Stormshadow told Willowtuft that it was time to sit her vigil.

"You are done at sunrise, but you can't talk nor eat in between," Stormshadow mewed. Willowtuft dipped her head.

"It won't be bad. I have gone without food for sunrises before," Willowtuft told him, then went to sit vigil. Dawn came, and Redflame came out of the nursery.

"You can come and eat now, Willowtuft. It's dawn."

"Thank you, Redflame." Willowtuft got up and took a shrew from the fresh-kill pile, then went to the nursery to see her kits and Bluestripe.

"Hi Bluestripe," she mewed to the other queen. "How are your kits?" She urged Patchkit and Flintkit to try the shrew as Bluestripe answered.

"Great, thank you. Redflame and I aren't sure what to name the she-kit, but I like Swallowkit for the tom."

"Maybe Cherrykit?" Willowtuft's kit, Patchkit piped up from his nest.

"Yeah! I like Cherrykit too, Patchkit!" Flintkit squealed.

"Cherrykit... I like that name. Thank you, Patchkit and Flintkit," Bluestripe purred to the two older kits. Suddenly, Darkpaw pushed through the nursery entrance with a bundle of herbs in his mouth.

"Here, Bluestripe. Take these. It's - er - oh right! Borage leaves to help produce milk for your kits." He turned to look around the nursery, "And don't tell anyone, but I put some heather nectar on them to make them sweeter."

"Thank you, Darkpaw," Bluestripe purred. She took the leaves from him and gulped them down. Patchkit looked at the apprentice.

"Guess what, Darkpaw!"

"What?" Darkpaw cocked his head.

"I'm going to be an apprentice soon!" the kit shrieked happily. Darkpaw mrowed with laughter.

"I'm going to be a full medicine cat soon, maybe when you become an apprentice," Darkpaw told the kits.

"*Wow*!" Flintkit squealed. "I can't *wait* to be a warrior, too!" Darkpaw just nodded, and slipped back out of the nursery.

"Swallowkit! Cherrykit! Come over here right now," Bluestripe called her tiny little kits. "Stop tumbling around so much," She scolded them gently.

The tiny kits ceased their playing, then nuzzled into the curve of

her belly to suckle. Redflame padded into the nursery.

"Hi Bluestripe, how are you?" he whispered into her ear.

"Good. How do you like Cherrykit for the she-kit?" she tipped her head to the side.

"Cherrykit." He looked at his kits. "It's perfect." He padded closer and sat down by the kits, who started pouncing on his paws. Redflame *mrowed* with laughter.

"They're perfect!" Redflame whispered.

Chapter 22

"Alright, Beaverpaw. Attack me."

"A-Attack you?" Beaverpaw stammered.

Falconwing purred with amusement. "Your mentor just asked you to do something," he told the apprentice.

Sunstorm watched as the young apprentice ran at Falconwing and tried to bat at him with his paws. But Falconwing stepped easily to the side.

"Too slow," he meowed. "Again."

Beaverpaw's tail lashed with determination as he slowly stepped forward, then pounced. Falconwing prepared to step aside again, but Beaverpaw saw it coming; he leaped onto his mentor, turned, and pinned him down.

Falconwing stood up and licked the dust off his chest. "Much better." He nodded approvingly.

"I'm hungry," Beaverpaw panted. "Can we go back and grab the rabbit I caught earlier and then head back to camp?"

Falconwing stretched. "I suppose so," he agreed. "Does that sound good?" He turned to Sunstorm.

"Of course." Sunstorm padded after them, a strange feeling making her belly lurch as she followed him. They seemed to be growing closer every day.

They made their way toward Snakerocks where Beaverpaw had temporarily buried his fresh-kill. The apprentice dug it up and the warriors found their holes where they had buried their own prey. The sun was high in the sky as they headed toward camp, the light breeze ruffling their fur.

"You better go take some fresh-kill to Bluestripe and Willowtuft," Falconwing told Beaverpaw. "Then you can eat."

The brown tabby nodded and grabbed a water vole along with his own rabbit and headed toward the nursery. The queens were talking with each other. Acornkit, Flintkit and Patchkit, Willowtuft's kits, were almost weaned by now, but Swallowkit and Cherrykit were gently nursing next to their mother.

"Food," Willowtuft purred. "I feel like I haven't eaten in a moon."

Beaverpaw dropped the water vole in front of her and she began to eat it. Her kits began to nibble at it excitedly. Then Beaverpaw gave Bluestripe the rabbit. The queens thanked him and Beaverpaw headed toward the fresh-kill pile, choosing a squirrel, then padded toward the apprentices' den.

Scarpaw was eating a starling. "I learned some battle moves today," he mewed. "You should have seen! I bet I nearly took Forestfrost's ears off!"

"I went hunting," Duskpaw meowed proudly. "I caught this quail all by myself. It practically leaped into my paws-"

Beaverpaw sat down and began to eat his squirrel.

"Is it true that Falconwing is with Sunstorm all the time now, Beaverpaw?" Duskpaw interjected suddenly.

"Mostly," Beaverpaw answered.

"I didn't think Falconwing seemed the type," Scarpaw mentioned. "He was always the fierce one who was willing to sacrifice anything for his Clan. I don't think anyone expected him to find a mate."

"How do you know they're mates?" Duskpaw shrugged. "Maybe they're just good friends."

Beaverpaw glanced toward the warriors' den. The two cats were indeed together.

"Have you seen Bluestripe's kits?" Beaverpaw asked. "I just saw

them earlier. They look just like their parents."

"I haven't," Scarpaw murmured. "But Willowtuft's kits are going to be apprenticed soon. They're like five and three-quarter moons or something."

"ThunderClan is growing fast," Duskpaw meowed wistfully. "I can't wait until I'm a warrior."

"We're barely apprentices," Beaverpaw pointed out.

"Oh, who cares? I hope Flintkit and Patchkit will make good denmates, anyway. It's loud enough with you two in here," Duskpaw sighed.

"Is not," Scarpaw growled.

"You snore."

"Barely!"

"Oh be quiet, you two." Beaverpaw grinned. "You two sound like a bunch of old badgers."

Sunstorm took a bite of the mouse she was sharing with Falconwing and felt that strange feeling again. He must have noticed, because he spoke again.

"Are you alright?" he asked her. "You've been quiet."

"Me? Oh, fine." She purred and wrapped her tail around his. "I've just been thinking..."

"Thinking what?" he asked sharply.

"Well, I think the Clan is starting to think we're more than just friends."

Falconwing let out a little *mrow* of laughter and looked into Sunstorm's eyes. "I thought you felt the same way, Sunstorm," he mewed earnestly.

"R-Really?" She had never considered that. "I mean, if you really want to-"

"Of course I want to." She felt her pelt brush against his. "I don't care if the Clan spreads rumors anymore. They always go away."

Sunstorm felt comforted as she lay her head on Falconwing's. Suddenly she felt like this had been waiting to happen all along, almost as if StarClan had planned them to be together. She felt her worries melt away and her eyes close for just a moment, breathing in the warm scent of Falconwing's fur. But then she realized something and opened her eyes.

"Where's Moonwhisper?"

Falconwing straightened. "I don't know," he admitted. "I haven't seen her since sunup."

"I feel like she's always gone this time of day," Sunstorm growled and her tail lashed. "You don't think we should look for her, do you?"

"Look for her? No. Maybe Stormshadow sent her on a patrol or something. She'll turn up."

"Should we ask him?"

"If you like. But I bet she's only hunting or something." But he could see she still looked worried.

"No, I won't ask him. I'll just keep telling myself she's hunting."

It was nearly sundown when Moonwhisper arrived. Her pelt was strong with the scent of wild garlic as she padded through the tunnel, and her jaws were full of them. Darkpaw ran up to her.

"Here, Darkpaw," she meowed, giving them to the apprentice. "I found these. Emberfur uses them, right?"

"Yeah," he replied, confused. But he took the garlic nonetheless and headed toward the medicine cat den.

"Hi," Moonwhisper mewed a bit lamely as she grabbed a piece of fresh-kill and sat down near the warriors' den. "Did I miss anything?"

"No," Sunstorm replied. She did not feel nearly as awkward being so near Falconwing now. "Were you really collecting herbs that whole time?"

"What? No. I went hunting, but it must be getting to be leaf-fall - I didn't find very much. But I stumbled across some wild garlic on the way back home."

"Oh." Sunstorm nodded confusedly.

"I'm going to bed." Falconwing licked Sunstorm's ear and headed for his nest inside the den. Sunstorm felt the warm feeling rise up inside her as she bade her sister goodnight as well and went to join Falconwing.

Her nest was next to his. She set her paws inside the nest and sat down, tucking her forepaws underneath her chest. She stretched her hind paws underneath her and pressed her face against the soft lining of the nest. She heard Moonwhisper walk in and opened her eyes a crack to see her take an expressionless glance at Beecloud, then lie down.

The next morning Sunstorm awoke early to find Moonwhisper leaving the den. Sunstorm could not help herself and padded after her. As they pushed through the tunnel Sunstorm hung back so her sister would not smell her and followed her by scent only. But she had hardly reached the Owl Tree when she heard a rustling.

Sunstorm spun around, ready to pounce, when a mottled brown cat made his way through the bracken. It was Falconwing.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Shh, not so loud." She swiped her tail over his mouth. "I'm following Moonwhisper."

"I'll go with you," he offered. Sunstorm nodded and they padded off together.

Beecloud could smell Moonwhisper's scent as he padded along. Where was Moonwhisper going? He could smell the scent of WindClan territory growing stronger and stronger as he passed Owl Tree and headed up near Fourtrees. He crossed the stream and found himself near the WindClan waterfalls. Where was Moonwhisper going, and *why?*

Falconwing crept under the bushes. Sunstorm was just behind him.

"There she is!" Falconwing whispered when he stopped. His voice was shocked.

"Great StarClan! She's with a WindClan cat!" Sunstorm hissed in his ear. He just nodded grimly. "What should we do?"

Falconwing didn't answer. A rustle in the bushes across the clearings told them that another cat was there. The two cats looked around quietly. It was Beecloud. His eyes were blazing and Sunstorm scented waves of hatred and sadness flowing from him. He seemed to whisper, agony flowing plainly off of him. For what seemed like a moon he watched Moonwhisper and the WindClan tom talk, his ears flattened, tail-tip touching the forest floor. He seemed unable to speak.

Sunstorm watched, agonizing sympathy flowing up in her heart. Should she show herself? Would it comfort Beecloud knowing that Moonwhisper's sister knew, too? Should she tell Fogcloud or Bluestripe? She pressed her nose into Falconwing's flank and padded in the other direction. Falconwing followed her.

When they were far out of earshot Sunstorm spoke. "I h-had no idea," she meowed softly. "There's no telling where her loyalties lie now, or what she feels for Beecloud. He must be in complete shock..."

Falconwing brushed against her pelt comfortingly. "I know," he told her. "I can tell she's loyal to ThunderClan. She will stop meeting that cat eventually."

Sunstorm had no choice but to believe him. Wanting to get to camp before Beecloud, they both stopped and caught some fresh-kill

before promptly heading off to camp.

Beecloud arrived at sunhigh. He did not talk to anyone at all. He moved jerkily, swiping prey off of the fresh-kill with more force than usual, and sitting on his own, far from the other warriors, near the nursery. Even his sister Forestfrost went over to him to try to talk to him, but after a short while she left him alone, looking weary.

"He won't tell me," she told Falconwing as she poked at her quail with a claw. "He's absolutely miserable. He's got bees in his brain." She looked up at them. "You don't happen to know what's bothering him, do you?"

"No," Falconwing lied. Sunstorm was glad she did not have to be the one to answer.

Shortly Moonwhisper came through the tunnel. Beecloud pricked up his ears, but did not look at her. The she-cat didn't seem to notice as she picked her meal and sat near the warriors' den as usual.

But then Beecloud stood up and walked toward the Highrock into Maplestar's den.

Sunstorm felt a chill run through her. She knew what he was going to do.

When Beecloud came out he called for Moonwhisper, who looked confused as she padded into Maplestar's den.

"Yes, Maplestar?" Sunstorm heard her sister meow.

"Beecloud tells me you have been meeting with a WindClan cat. This deserves punishment, as you have broken the warrior code," Maplestar mewed loud and clear, sadness sparkling in her eyes.

"It's true, Maplestar," Moonwhisper meowed miserably. "I've been meeting a cat at the border."

"Did anyone else see?"

"I don't know," Moonwhisper admitted.

Sunstorm pricked her ears beside the Highrock, listening intently.

Maplestar nodded at Moonwhisper's response, sighing. "Moonwhisper. I have noticed you have been gone from camp quite often as well. I'd like to know the truth. Did anyone else see you with this cat?" her leader repeated.

Sunstorm heard a sigh come from Moonwhisper. "I didn't scent anyone else there," the silver she-cat whispered, dipping her head in shame. "You must believe me!" Falconwing looked at his mate as the conversation in their leader's den went on, his eyes wide.

"Are you sure?"

There was a brief silence.

"There may have been witnesses, Maplestar, but I can assure you I was not aware exactly who."

Now Stormshadow spoke. "How are we going to deal with this, Maplestar? Shouldn't she be punished?"

Maplestar paused. "You remember that WindClan cat that asked to join our Clan? Perhaps this is who Moonwhisper has been meeting. Perhaps he was not cast out by his kin at all." There was a long, meaningful silence.

"Yes, that was him, Maplestar," Moonwhisper cut in. "He wanted to join ThunderClan for mine and his sake! He had courage, Maplestar! He did so much and was willing to give up everything because he loves me. And you turned him away. Yes, I have been meeting him. Of course I have. And you can't stop me. I am loyal to my Clan, but I can't stop meeting Ravenfrost." Moonwhisper gulped in a deep breath, and Sunstorm could tell she was awaiting anxiously for Maplestar's reply.

"Perhaps I *can't* stop you from meeting this... Ravenfrost," Maplestar meowed painfully. Sunstorm could tell that Moonwhisper was surprised through the silence. "But I know that perhaps there will come a time when you will realize that your heart lies elsewhere,

and that you will realize you can't meet Ravenfrost and still be loyal to your Clan." Moonwhisper looked ruefully at her leader. Starlight glimmered in her sad eyes.

"What are we to do with her, Maplestar?" Stormshadow interrupted. "She is guilty of treason!"

"You are right, Stormshadow. Moonwhisper, I expect that you will assume apprentice duties for the next half-moon, doing their duties, caring for the elders, and not leaving camp without permission. You will not be permitted to go to the Gathering."

"Very well," Moonwhisper sighed. Falconwing and Sunstorm ducked out of view as Moonwhisper pelted out of the den, a look of heartbreak and humiliation on her face.

"Come on," Falconwing meowed. "We should get going before anyone sees us eavesdropping."

"Should I tell my littermates about Ravenfrost?" Sunstorm whispered as they padded towards the warriors' den. "I don't know if I should burden them with knowing Moonwhisper betrayed us..."

"No, there is no need," he decided.

"You're right." Sunstorm sighed. "But it doesn't feel right being the only one to know."

Falconwing pressed himself against her gently. "Don't worry. Everything will be alright in the end."

Sunstorm closed her eyes and tried to convince herself to believe him.

The two warriors made their way to the warriors' den. Moonwhisper was sitting at the entrance. When her littermates had gathered, except for Bluestripe, who was still in the nursery, she spoke.

"I'm going to have kits," she announced.

"That's great!" Fogcloud praised. But as Sunstorm looked she saw

that Moonwhisper did not seem as overjoyed as a queen normally was when she received such news.

Sunstorm's eyes widened. Moonwhisper? Having kits? She could hardly believe what she was saying. But she finally realized what pain her sister must be feeling - she was in love with a tom of another Clan, and she was torn between loyalties. And now she would have kits that would be half WindClan.

It was nearly sundown, but Sunstorm wasn't tired at all. Moonwhisper went to sleep early. Beecloud did not speak to anyone. Sunstorm wondered who was more shocked and heartbroken - Beecloud or Moonwhisper. At first she had thought the former, but now she was not sure at all.

As Moonwhisper slept Sunstorm could see that her sister's belly was indeed round and swollen. She should have moved into the nursery long ago, Sunstorm thought - and she would have if someone had told Maplestar about Moonwhisper's reason for disappearing sooner.

The next morning Sunstorm awoke to the sound of strangled cries. Moonwhisper was sprawled in front of the warriors' den.

"Her kits!" Beecloud gasped. "They're coming! Fetch Emberfur!"

"Kits? What kits?" Laceleaf inquired. But Lavenderpelt was dashing toward the medicine cat den, and in a few heartbeats she was pelting back over with Emberfur and Darkpaw on her tail, both carrying herbs.

"Bite down on this," Emberfur instructed, giving her a stick. Moonwhisper gasped and clamped down on the stick.

"There - keep pushing, Moonwhisper, breathe-"

Moonwhisper's flank heaved, her tail twitching in pain. Her eyes were wide with worry. And then Sunstorm realized. Breathing was just something Moonwhisper could never do well. A ripple pulsed through her sister's body, making her fur shimmer in the weak sunlight. Then a little wet lump of fur slid onto the grass.

"Looks like that's the only one, Moonwhisper," Emberfur murmured.

"Darkpaw, start licking the kit. Get its blood flowing."

Darkpaw did not need the telling twice. He carefully picked up the kit by the scruff and pulled it closer to him, then ran his tongue over it furiously in every direction. The tiny kit began to dry and let out a tiny mewl.

"Moonwhisper, come with me. Take the kit."

Darkpaw picked up the kit and the three cats made their way to the medicine cat den. Emberfur took an herb from an ivy wrap and handed it to Moonwhisper, her face looking grave.

"Maplestar told me," she meowed. "Eat this. I'll have Darkpaw take the kit to Bluestripe."

"His name is Drizzlekit," Moonwhisper whispered at once, her eyes drifting toward the bundle of herbs near her paws. She began to chew it. When she had eaten all the herbs Emberfur had given her, she stumbled to the nursery, holding Drizzlekit by his scruff. Bluestripe emerged from the warm den as Moonwhisper sat down at the entrance. The blue- grey queen glanced at the kit, her eyes wide in sympathy. Then her gaze traveled up and locked with Moonwhisper's. There was no hatred in those green eyes, only love and sorrow. Bluestripe picked up the mewling kit and carried him into the nursery, licking her sister's ear as she disappeared into the den.

Chapter 23

Moonwhisper shifted restlessly in her nest.

"How can you prove where your loyalties lie, Moonwhisper? Or should I call you Moon*traitor*?" Maplestar challenged. Moonwhisper shrunk under her leader's gaze. A gurgling river flowed around them, threatening to flood the ground around their paws. Wind blowed and screeched as thunder boomed in their ears, flaming yellow scratches of lighting scoring the sky. Ravenfrost appeared beside Maplestar.

"Don't give in, Moonwhisper. Follow your heart," she heard him whisper over the bellowing storm. He stepped forward and Drizzlekit wove through his father's paws.

"How could you, Moonwhisper?" the tiny silver mottled kit spat. "How could you leave me to be half-Clan? To have *this* idiot as a father?" Drizzlekit glanced up at Ravenfrost, a disgusted look on his face. "Moonwhisper, I hate you!" Moonwhisper stepped back, shocked. Blood roared in her ears, and she stood with her jaw gaped open as Maplestar was swept away in the storm. Soon the swirling wind swept Drizzlekit off his paws, and before it carried Ravenfrost away, he stepped forward, rubbing his cheek against hers. He looked at her lovingly one last time with his icy blue eyes before he, too, was carried away in the storm.

Moonwhisper woke with a gasp. She stared around the warriors' den, her heart pounding. She took in a deep breath and settled her nose on her paws, her eyes wide open. Sleep was a long ways away. She shuddered, remembering her dream. She screwed her eyes shut, steadying her breath. Then her eyes flew open.

She stalked out of the den, wobbly after just giving birth the day before. Her belly was still heavy with milk, but with no kit to feed, Emberfur had given her parsley to slowly stop the flow. Moonwhisper glanced around the empty camp, making sure no one was awake. Everyone was in their nests, sleeping soundly. She

quietly made her way to the nursery and poked her head in. Bluestripe and Willowtuft were curled up beside their kits, their flanks slowly rising and falling with rhythmic breaths. Moonwhisper stifled a purr as she spotted what she was looking for. Her silver mottled son was curled up next to Bluestripe, snoring softly. Moonwhisper settled down at the nursery entrance, watching Drizzlekit with more love than she had ever felt. More love than she had felt even towards Ravenfrost.

"What are you doing out here?" The rough meow made Moonwhisper turn. Beecloud was standing behind her, his orange tabby fur glowing elegantly in the bright moonlight. His dark yellow eyes stared at her with both sadness and hatred.

"I-I wanted to see my kit," she murmured, avoiding his gaze. He sat down in front of her, his fur ruffling in the light breeze.

"Do you realize how much pain you caused me, Moonwhisper?" Beecloud whispered. His eyes glowed with rage as he went on. "When I saw you with that WindClan cat, I was shocked. For the longest time I thought we had something, Moonwhisper. But clearly I was wrong. I can't believe you would do that to me!"

Moonwhisper glanced inside the nursery, breathing a silent sigh of relief when she found the queens and kits still sleeping soundly. She boldly met Beecloud's gaze.

"I'm sorry, Beecloud," she meowed quietly, but boldly. "We *did* have something, but when I was captured by a WindClan patrol, Ravenfrost said he would only help me escape if I met with him the next night. I didn't think anything of it at first, but after that second meeting, I knew I had to keep seeing him. He loves me more than you ever did! And why did you tell Maplestar? That means you don't love me at all!"

Beecloud's fur bristled with fury. "How can you say that?" He choked out the words. "How could you ever say that? I truly loved you, and I thought we could be mates. I loved you more than any other cat, but instead you betrayed me and met with this other tom, and he was WindClan! I just don't understand why you love him more... I had to tell Maplestar, otherwise you would have just kept

meeting Ravenfrost, and hurting me more and more with each passing day." He dropped his gaze and settled down, laying his nose on his paws.

Moonwhisper felt a sudden, violent pang of guilt. She was swept back to when she was a kit, then an apprentice, padding after Beecloud like was was the best cat in the world. She had wanted to be mates with him, too, but all that changed when she had started meeting Ravenfrost. She closed her eyes. "I-I never really stopped to think about you, Beecloud, or how you would feel. I'm sorry. I don't even know how to put into words how sorry I am. I had loved you, too, and just forgot all about you when I started meeting Ravenfrost. I..." She stopped, not knowing if what she was about to say would remain true. But she would try. "I promise I will never meet with Ravenfrost again, never speak with him, never go near him. I don't know how I can make it up to you, Beecloud, but please, please believe me when I saw I will try." She shook with sadness, whimpering slightly as she looked away.

"How can you make a promise you can't keep? You and Ravenfrost have a *kit*! How could you ever promise such a thing?"

"Because I need to make it up to you. I want to feel the same way about you as I had felt since a kit. Drizzlekit won't know me as his mother, but as just another Clanmate. As far as he's concerned, Bluestripe kitted him, not me. His littermates are Bluestripe's kits, and he won't know anything different."

Beecloud stared at her. Moonwhisper closed her eyes, lowering her head. How could she have been so selfish? How could she have done so much to hurt Beecloud, especially after they had once been so close?

"Moonwhisper, I want to believe you," Beecloud finally whispered. "I really want you to feel the same way about me as you once did. I want to be what we wished when we were young. To be mates. But how could you ever love me, after the love you have felt towards Ravenfrost?"

"I-I don't know," Moonwhisper admitted. "But give me time. Things will work out with us. Ravenfrost will be a thing of the past, long

forgotten. Drizzlekit will have no connection with his true father. Redflame is his father now, not a WindClan cat. And he is not half-Clan." Beecloud looked up at her, tears glistening in his eyes. There was no longer anger reflected there, but agonizing sadness.

"Please forget Ravenfrost," he pleaded. "Please keep your promise. I don't know if you can ever love me again, but all I ask of you is to try. Search your heart for what you once felt for me." Dipping his head, he stalked back towards the warriors' den, his tail dragging limply in the dust.

Moonwhisper sighed. She had made things so complicated for herself. She would have to hurt the heart of one tom, whether it would be Ravenfrost or Beecloud. She had to choose; she knew this more than anything. She glanced up at the sky. Silverpelt shone brightly, and a round moon was seemingly etched into the sky. She lowered her gaze and stared at the dust. Little sprouts of grass were growing beneath her paws, green and soft. Life went on. The world would die in harsh leaf-falls, and come alive again in newleaf, bright and victorious. Moonwhisper glanced toward the nursery one last time. Drizzlekit was shifting closer to Bluestripe's belly. She turned away and headed for the warriors' den, leaving her son - no, Bluestripe's son - and all she had with Ravenfrost behind.

Weak sunlight started pouring through the trees when Moonwhisper finally settled into her nest. Farthest from her, Beecloud twitched in his sleep. She fell asleep quickly. And this time her dreams weren't troubled.

Moonwhisper woke early the next morning. She was the first awake in the camp. She figured she had only slept for a few minutes, but she told herself it was better than nothing. Her conversation with Beecloud the night before was still fresh in her mind. *I have to choose. Beecloud or Ravenfrost. Beecloud or Ravenfrost...*

She made her way to the back of the den where Beecloud was sleeping. She took a deep breath and nudged him awake.

"Wha-?" His eyes opened and closed when he saw who had woken him. "What do you want, Moonwhisper?" he murmured.

Moonwhisper shuffled her paws. "Can we go on a walk? Before anyone else wakes up?" she asked nervously. Beecloud sighed, but re-opened his eyes and hauled himself to his paws.

"Fine. But you better have a good reason for this, because you're not supposed to leave camp, remember? And I didn't get any sleep last night-"

"Because you had to talk to me," Moonwhisper finished. "And yes, I remember my punishment." Beecloud grunted. Suddenly memory flashed in his eyes. Moonwhisper guessed he was remembering their conversation the night before.

"Yeah. Because we need to talk." He shook his head and slipped through the gorse tunnel out of camp, not waiting for Moonwhisper to follow. She caught up to him as he started padding into the forest.

"So..." she began awkwardly. Beecloud said nothing. "I-I realized I have to make a decision..."

"That you do," Beecloud grunted.

"And I thought about it all night, and-"

"You going to keep your promise, Moonwhisper? Because you said you would." Beecloud stopped and turned towards her. He sat down and began grooming. Moonwhisper took a deep breath.

"Yes. I'm keeping my promise. I will never see Ravenfrost again. I choose you over him." Beecloud stopped washing and stared at her, his paw still over his ear. Suddenly his eyes brightened.

"You *sure* you can keep this promise?" he ventured.

Moonwhisper nodded. "I'll try."

Beecloud broke into a purr. He gently touched his nose to Moonwhisper's ear.

"Thank you."

Chapter 24

Bluestripe woke early a few mornings later to the tiny kits mewling for milk. She swept them with her tail to the curve of her belly to suckle. The brambles in the front of the nursery rustled and Moonwhisper stalked in with fresh-kill. Drizzlekit, who had stopped suckling to play with Swallowkit's tail, turned towards Bluestripe.

"Who's that, Mother?" the tiny kit squeaked. Bluestripe saw Moonwhisper tear her eyes from Drizzlekit. Bluestripe walked over to her sister to give her an empathetic nudge with her muzzle. Moonwhisper just purred and looked lovingly at her son, then left the nursery.

"That was Moonwhisper, my littermate," she told the tiny kit, wondering why Moonwhisper had actually seemed happy.

"Oh," was all the kit said, and then started suckling again. Redflame padded into the nursery, giving each one of his kits a lick on the head.

"There's going to an apprentice ceremony soon, and Maplestar wants me to be a mentor!" he told his mate, then pushed his muzzle into hers.

"That's wonderful!" Bluestripe purred, and suddenly Maplestar's yowl sounded through the camp.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting!"

Maplestar leaped onto the Highrock as two little kits followed their mother in front of the crowd.

"Tulipkit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed," Maplestar declared. "From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Tulippaw.

Your mentor will be Redflame. I hope Redflame will pass down all he knows to you."

Redflame padded up to the front of the crowd.

"Redflame, you received excellent training from Oakleaf, and have shown yourself to be strong and a great warrior. I expect you to pass these traits onto Tulippaw."

Redflame stepped forward, and gently touched noses with Tulippaw.

"Iriskit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Irispaw. Your mentor will be Sunstorm. I hope she will pass down all she knows to you."

Dazed with surprise, Bluestripe saw her littermate, Sunstorm, make her way to the front of the Highrock.

"Sunstorm, you received excellent training from Stormfoot, and you have shown yourself to be a swift hunter and fighter. I expect you to pass these traits onto Irispaw."

Glowing and giddy, Sunstorm touched noses with Irispaw.

"Tulippaw! Irispaw! Tulippaw! Irispaw!" The Clan swarmed around the new apprentices. Maplestar waited for them to quiet down.

"The Gathering is tonight, and the new apprentices and mentors will go. Stormshadow will choose the rest of the attending cats." Maplestar flicked her tail and the meeting was over. Oakleaf walked over to the nursery where Bluestripe and Willowtuft were.

"Stormshadow wants to know if you want to go to the Gathering," he mewed.

"Sure, Oakleaf!" Willowtuft purred.

"Great! I'll tell him." Oakleaf turned around and padded toward Stormshadow.

"What are Gatherings like, Bluestripe?" Willowtuft mewed to the other queen.

"Well, all four Clans go and meet to share news like new apprentices and warriors," Bluestripe informed Willowtuft, who nodded her head. Maplestar's yowl sounded once more through the camp, calling all the chosen cats to come gather for the Gathering. Willowtuft mewed to her kits, "Now just stay here, and don't get into mischief. I'll be back soon." She turned and padded out of camp with the other cats.

"It sure is dark out here for a Gathering night," Stormshadow remarked to Maplestar as they padded along the WindClan border to Fourtrees, who nodded. "I wonder if StarClan is hiding the moon?" Darkpaw stepped forward.

"Maybe it's an omen!" he mewed earnestly. "Maybe we shouldn't go tonight. Maplestar?" Darkpaw prompted.

"No, we will go. It's only a bit dark," she meowed.

The ThunderClan cats were nearing Fourtrees when they spotted WindClan crossing the Twoleg bridge across the WindClan Falls. Sunstorm noticed Ravenfrost near the part of the crowd closest to her.

"Watch where you're setting your paws, furbrain!" a WindClan cat hissed.

The bridge creaked and a cat let out a blood-curdling noise. As the ear-splitting screech filled the air a grey and white cat fell off of the bridge and into a dark, swirling pool below.

"Ravenfrost!" Maplestar screeched as she realized who it was. She rushed forward and dove head-first into the pool. Ravenfrost yowled for help as he floated to the surface, gasping for air. Maplestar swam towards the WindClan tom, putting her shoulder under his chest to support him.

"Swim!" Maplestar gasped. Ravenfrost struck out with his hind legs in an attempt to swim to the shore.

"I don't know how! I'm not a RiverClan cat!" His head went under again, and Maplestar hoisted him up once more. She pulled him a few fox-lengths more, and suddenly, Ravenfrost screeched and pushed onto Maplestar's back, pushing her under the water. She felt slippery bodies of fish swim through her paws. She shook and tried to gulp in air. Maplestar was about to reach the surface when she was caught in the flooding, tormenting stream of the waterfall. It pushed her down again, tumbling her around. Her lungs were about to burst. Suddenly, she felt claws grip her pelt, and was pulled up out of the current. It was Ravenfrost. She gulped in lungfuls of air as he hauled her to shore.

"Help me!" Ravenfrost screeched to the cats on shore. Stormshadow waded into the water and grabbed his leader by the scruff, and hauled her out of the water, then waded back in to get Ravenfrost to safety. Emberfur padded up, trying to push some more water out of her leader's lungs.

"Emberfur," Maplestar whispered, and the medicine cat leaned forward.

Maplestar closed her eyes. The moonlight shone above, making her brown pelt a silvery gray. The stars reflected in her bright hunter's eyes.

"StarClan is coming to take me."

"No." Tears welled up in the medicine cat's eyes. "Don't do this to me. Maplestar, please..."

"Emberfur." Maplestar's mew was soft and hoarse. "You've seen death before. Take courage, old friend."

Maplestar arched her back as she curled into a tight ball in an attempt to cough, but too much water had gotten into her lungs. In a racking fit of gasping and coughs, Maplestar's body shook with a spasm and went still at last.

Emberfur clung to the slippery rocks, then edged her way back up to the edge of the bridge where her Clan was.

"That was her last life!" Emberfur whispered, her voice shocked and dry.

"You mangy flea-ridden *kittypet*!" Beecloud hissed as he pushed through the crowd towards Ravenfrost, who was sprawled next to Maplestar, stiff and cold. "You betrayed your Clan, and now try to kill my leader?" He leaped onto the WindClan cat, hissing with fury. Stormshadow and Oakleaf surrounded Ravenfrost, and Beecloud stumbled off of him.

"I didn't kill her!" Ravenfrost growled, coughing up mouthfuls of water. "I wouldn't kill a Clan leader in cold blood!"

"*You* are coming with us," Stormshadow hissed. Darkpaw and Emberfur padded up to him.

"She's gone," Darkpaw whispered. "Your Clan leader is now Stormshadow."

"We can't bury her," Stormshadow told his Clanmates regretfully. "We won't be able to carry her up to the bridge."

When they reached Fourtrees, the other three Clans were already there. Clearly, they had not even cared to stop when their Clanmate fell off the bridge. Dewstar spotted Ravenfrost with the ThunderClan cats, immediately looked for Maplestar, but saw she was not there.

"What happened?" Dewstar asked, her eyes wide in shock.

"One of your warriors fell of the bridge," Stormshadow meowed in explanation. "We think he took Maplestar with him."

"He was supposed to be guarding camp!" Dewstar leaped down from Great Rock and touched noses with Stormshadow as a sign of respect for the new leader.

"Ravenfrost! Come here right now," she yowled. Beecloud escorted him over to Dewstar, who nodded her thanks. The two cats started mewing to each other, and Timberstar broke the silence when they were finished.

"It seems as though this Gathering was not meant to be! There were clouds over the moon. It was an omen!" His meow rang over the crowd of cats. "There will be no Gathering tonight." He flicked his tail and the ShadowClan cats trotted through the tall oaks back to their territory. RiverClan left as well, and finally the last two Clans. Dewstar had a patrol of cats surrounding Ravenfrost. Stormshadow padded back into camp, the news quickly spreading to the other cats, all except Moonwhisper, who was snoring softly in her nest.

* * *

As Timberstar flicked his tail for his Clan to follow him, a strong breeze ruffled a ShadowClan elder's fur. But among the zephyr was a familiar scent - a scent he only ever smelled at Gatherings. He looked around him. Fresh ThunderClan scent? When they had left a while ago? No one seemed to notice as he headed west toward the WindClan border, his paws carrying him faster than he had ever gone before.

All was quiet except for the steady, powerful rumble of the Falls. The tom spotted a figure near the edge of the stream, and he was struck with a pang of both curiosity and fear.

Leaping from rock to slippery, drenched rock, he at last made his way to the figure. The beautiful brown figure was still, her gentle eyes shut forever. Redfoot gazed at her for several horrible moments, tears clouding up in his bright blue eyes. He pressed his muzzle into the soft fur and licked it gently, not being able to say much. "May you find good hunting, swift running, and shelter while you sleep, Beloved," he whispered so quietly that not even anyone next to him would have been able to hear it. Redfoot curled up next to Maplestar's body and closed his eyes. As he drifted off into a deep sleep, he could have sworn that he hard a soft, familiar voice that said, "I love you, Redfoot."

* * *

Emberfur padded up to Stormshadow. "We need to go to the Moonstone so you can recieve your nine lives," she mewed, looking around. "Now." Stormshadow dipped his head, announced to his Clan that he was going to the Moonstone, and slipped through the

gorse tunnel after Emberfur. The rest of the cats retreated into their dens, weary from the false Gathering.

"Stormshadow is back!" Swiftclaw called out as the new Clan leader and the medicine cat returned. It was the morning after Maplestar's death.

"StarClan has granted me nine lives. Now it is time to appoint the new deputy." He darted to the Highrock and jumped up on it. "I say this before StarClan, that the spirits of our warrior ancestors may hear and approve my choice. The new deputy will be Redflame," Stormstar announced from Highrock. Emberfur stepped up.

"At Mothermouth, I decided to give Darkpaw his warrior name. Darkpaw is now Darkspot, a full medicine cat of ThunderClan!" Emberfur announced excitedly.

"Redflame! Stormstar! Darkspot! Redflame! Stormstar! Darkspot!" the cats cheered sleepily, but overjoyed nonetheless.

When the meeting was over and the cats gathered to congratulate the new deputy and leader, Stormstar pulled Swiftclaw aside. "Where is Willowtuft?" he meowed suddenly.

"In the nursery with Bluestripe. Why?" Swiftclaw asked him.

"I just want to know if she still wishes to stay in the Clan, after what happened at the Gathering." Swiftclaw nodded, and Stormstar padded across camp to the nursery.

"Willowtuft? Are you in here?" he called as he entered the nursery.

"Yes, I am. Storm*star* now, right?" she inquired. Stormstar nodded.

"I just wanted to know, after what happened at the Gathering, if you still wish to stay here in ThunderClan."

"I wouldn't leave even if there was a badger attack!" Willowtuft purred. "I have found that this is my true home."

"Good. Your kits are going to be apprenticed soon!" Stormstar looked at Acornkit, Patchkit and Flintkit, who were play-fighting

with leaves. "In two sunrises, they will be six moons old, and ready to be apprentices!"

"That's wonderful!" Willowtuft meowed joyously. "I can't wait!" Darkspot entered the nursery as Stormstar left to check on Bluestripe's kits.

Bluestripe, Fogcloud, Sunstorm, and Redflame gathered; Moonwhisper had missed the ceremony, as she had been sleeping.

"We need to tell Moonwhisper sometime," Fogcloud mewed, the others nodding in agreement. "About what happened.

"There she is!" Bluestripe whispered.

"Hi," Moonwhisper yawned. "What happened at the Gathering?"

"Maplestar is dead," Redflame told her. "Ravenfrost fell off the WindClan waterfall, and she went in after him..."

"What!" Moonwhisper screeched. "She couldn't have died trying to save him!"

"Well, she did," Sunstorm told her sister, who looked at the other cats. They just nodded.

"B- But," she stuttered. "Oh, it's all my fault," she whispered.

Two sunrises passed, and at sunhigh, Stormstar called his first official Clan meeting.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting!" Stormstar waited for the kits to sit in the front. "Patchkit, Flintkit, Acornkit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Patchpaw, Flintpaw and Acornpaw. Patchpaw, your mentor will be Sandfur. Acornpaw, Muddypelt will be yours. Flintpaw, I will be your mentor. I hope I can pass down all I know on to you." He turned Sandfur.

"Sandfur, you are ready to take on another apprentice. You had received excellent training from Greypuddle, and you have shown

yourself to be skilled and careful. You will be the mentor of Patchpaw, and I expect you to pass on all you know to Patchpaw."

"Muddypelt, you are ready to take on another apprentice. You had received excellent training from Russetclaw, and you have shown yourself to be skilled and careful. You will be the mentor of Acornpaw, and I expect you to pass on all you know to him."

Stormstar leapt down and touched noses with Flintpaw, watching Sandfur and Muddypelt do the same with their apprentices.

"Flintpaw! Patchpaw! Acornpaw! Flintpaw! Patchpaw! Acornpaw!" the cats chanted, and Willowtuft purred happily, proud that her kits were now apprentices.

Chapter 25

Sunstorm stretched and blinked in the sunny light. Suddenly she remembered that she was a mentor now and she had training to do. She stood up and padded over to the apprentices' den, peering inside where the little bodies of apprentices were slowly rising and falling. Sunstorm caught Irispaw's brown tabby shape in the corner, next to her sister, Tulippaw.

"Irispaw," Sunstorm mewed quietly so she would not disturb the others. "Get up!"

Irispaw jolted awake. "What is it?" she muttered.

"Time for training," Sunstorm replied, turning around and signalling for her to follow.

First they passed the Great Sycamore and headed toward Snakerocks, near the Thunderpath.

"Careful near Snakerocks," she cautioned. "Deadly adders live there."

"O-Okay," meowed Irispaw uneasily. "What's that terrible smell?"

"That's the Thunderpath," Sunstorm explained. "Now listen to me when I say this: do not go near it, and do not touch it. Listen to my words."

Irispaw nodded.

They soon reached the black expanse of gravelly black stuff and Irispaw looked bewildered at first. Soon, however, a monster roared by and Irispaw recoiled instantly, digging her claws into the ground.

"Monsters!" she breathed.

"Exactly. Now you see what I mean." Sunstorm sighed and went on. "You see, on the other side of the Path is ShadowClan territory.

They have a way to get to Gatherings, but wherever it is it's not near ThunderClan land."

Irispaw nodded. "I can smell them, too," she added.

The young apprentice followed the red cat through the brambles and past Owl Tree until they neared Fourtrees, its four great oaks towering over the clearing. Irispaw's eyes widened.

"This is where the Gatherings happen!" Irispaw gaped.

"Yeah. It's sort of neutral land, so that's why cats rarely go there unless it's full moon." Sunstorm led her past the stream that ran near Fourtrees until it drained it into the river, glistening in the sunlight, then to Sunningrocks, the massive, flat rocks lining the shore and extending past it.

"I never knew our territory was so beautiful when I was a kit," Irispaw sighed dreamily. "I'd never dream of swimming, though. I wonder how RiverClan does it."

When at last they finished the tour Sunstorm caught a pair of rabbits and they headed back to camp.

"Here," she told Irispaw, handing her one. "Take this to the elders."

Irispaw nodded and bounded off, the rabbit in her jaws. *So this is what it's like to be a mentor,* Sunstorm thought as she took her rabbit off to the warriors' den. Falconwing had just arrived with Beaverpaw.

"How'd your first day as a mentor go, Sunstorm?" he asked her as Beaverpaw went off to the nursery to drop off his kill.

"Great," Sunstorm replied. "It's just the easy part, though - touring the territory. I don't know how I'll manage hunting and battle practice."

"It's not as hard as it sounds. I can bring Beaverpaw to a battle practice once Irispaw knows the basics," he offered.

"Alright," Sunstorm agreed.

"Come to think of it," he added, "I'm going to go talk to Stormstar about him being made a warrior in a couple moons. He's doing well." Without waiting for her acknowledgement, he stood up and headed toward the Highrock.

Tinyblossom glanced up at Sunstorm with a mischievous glint in her eye. "Have you ever thought about having kits?" she mentioned suddenly.

"K-Kits? Why?" Sunstorm replied confusedly.

Tinyblossom purred with amusement. "Falconwing seems like he'd be a good father," she told her. "And you're so close..."

"That's for StarClan to decide," Sunstorm meowed fervently. "I'm fine where I am now, and if that's what they want, then perhaps I will."

Fogcloud went to sit beside Tinyblossom, and they began to talk together. Sunstorm thought very deeply as she ate her rabbit. The idea did not seem very unappealing, she noticed. But she had only been mates with Falconwing for almost a moon.

She watched as Bluestripe's kits trooped in front of their mother near the nursery. Drizzlekit, she noticed with a pang of sadness, was so much like his mother with his silver coloring, but he had the same mottled pattern and bright blue eyes as his father, Ravenfrost. She wondered if he ever noticed how different he looked from his siblings, except that he looked a bit like Bluestripe because she was his true mother's kin. Cherrykit looked exactly like her father, only that she was a bit darker, and Swallowkit like his mother. They looked so harmonious and united...

"Hi Bluestripe," Sunstorm greeted her sister.

"Hi." Bluestripe looked up from her kits and flicked her tail in a friendly way. "How are you?"

"Good," Sunstorm agreed. "How're the kits?"

"Great. I'm going to try to start giving them fresh-kill so I can eventually wean them," she explained. "It's so wonderful having

Drizzlekit, but it breaks my heart that Moonwhisper can't mother him. She told me it reminds her too much of Ravenfrost." Bluestripe's eyes glittered sadly. "He plays so well with my kits."

Sunstorm watched them for a while as they began to tumble around together. Cherrykit and Swallowkit, both the kits of strong warriors, would have overtaken their foster brother easily if the latter was not so fast. It was not hard, Sunstorm noticed, to tell that he was half WindClan. But everyone in camp must have known by now. She remembered the days when she was a kit, play-fighting with her siblings. But it seemed so far away by now.

"It must be amazing, having kits of your own," Sunstorm meowed suddenly.

Bluestripe glanced up. "It certainly is," she agreed.

"Bluestripe," Swallowkit piped up, "Is that your sister, too?"

"Yes, it is," Bluestripe nodded.

"But you look so different!" Cherrykit tilted her head.

"I look more like my father, and Bluestripe looks more like our mother," Sunstorm explained. But the kits did not seem to understand.

"Wait till they see Fogcloud," Bluestripe laughed.

"What are we doing today, Sunstorm?" Irispaw asked as they padded toward the sandy hollow.

"We're doing battle practice with Beaverpaw and Tulippaw."

"But I don't know how to fight," the apprentice replied, confused.

"Well, I'm going to teach you how." They reached the hollow where Falconwing and Redflame were waiting.

"Alright - how about we start with the new apprentices so they can learn some easier moves?" Redflame suggested.

"Alright - Tulippaw, Irispaw, come on up. And mind you keep your claws sheathed," Falconwing added.

The two sisters nodded and backed away from each other, facing each other. Then they each readied themselves to pounce.

Tulippaw pounced first.

"Keep your tail level!" Redflame yowled through the fray. "Get on top of her!"

Tulippaw obeyed - she dropped her tail and pounced on top of her sister, trying to get a hind paw on Irispaw's tail.

"Remember, in a real battle, you'll be using claws," Falconwing added. "Keep your paws up and don't let your belly get exposed!"

"Get out of there, Irispaw! The cat on top always has the advantage!" Sunstorm barked.

Irispaw kicked her sister with her hind paws, sending Tulippaw flying into the dust. Irispaw's fur bristled with excitement.

"Great recovery!" Sunstorm praised her. "Tulippaw and Beaverpaw next."

The more experienced apprentice dodged the younger's attacks and pounced onto her. Squirming, Tulippaw regained her footing and, following her sister's techniques, threw him off. Beaverpaw quickly turned around and began fighting her again.

Beaverpaw won that round, his eyes widening with glee. "That was great, Beaverpaw," Falconwing praised him. "All of you did great."

"Can we go hunting now?" Tulippaw inquired. "I'm starving - it must be near sunhigh by now."

"Sure, sure," Redflame answered, nodding. "Come on." He flicked his tail as a signal to follow and his apprentice went after him. Sunstorm called for Irispaw and they padded off into the forest together.

The forest was lush and green with greenleaf, and Sunstorm dreaded the day when leaf-fall showed it had come. It would be about a moon before that, however, and Sunstorm held her head and tail high. Then she stopped suddenly and turned to face her apprentice.

"Alright, Irispaw. What do you smell?"

Irispaw lifted her head. "Hare," she meowed. "And badger." Her eyes widened and she looked around wildly.

Sunstorm sniffed the air. "You're right," she acknowledged. "But it's stale. Notice how it's not as strong?"

Irispaw nodded. "I'm glad," she mewed. "I wouldn't want to come across one of *those*..."

"And neither would I. But let's see if you can catch that hare you scented."

"Oh... okay," Irispaw replied.

"Keep low to the ground, and follow by scent, not by sight," Sunstorm told her. "Keep upwind so the wind blows your fur behind you - your prey won't scent you first that way. Now go on; I'll watch."

Irispaw nodded and sniffed the air again, ducking into a crouch and heading against the wind. Her mentor watched as she carefully put one paw forward at a time. Sunstorm could barely see the animal's ears above the grass near a tree. Irispaw's ears flicked in anticipation until at last she pounced and sank her teeth into the hare. Her eyes glowed with pride as she trotted over with it to her mentor.

"Brilliant!" Sunstorm praised her. "And on your first try, too. Now let's see if you can catch something else and then you can take something to Emberfur and Darkspot."

"Alright," Irispaw's reply came muffled through the fur of the fresh-kill. She went over to a tree, dug a small hole, and scraped dirt and dried leaves over the hare. Then she dashed off into the shrubbery.

Soon she returned with a thrush dangling in her jaws.

"Great," Sunstorm praised her. "I'll go hunt something. You bring your catch back to camp."

"Sure thing." Irispaw nodded, and went off to where she had buried her hare.

Soon Sunstorm returned to camp carrying a starling and a mouse. She took both to Bluestripe, whose kits were chattering away nearby.

"Fresh-kill!" The queen licked her lips. "How is Irispaw?"

"She's doing well," Sunstorm replied. "We practiced fighting with Beaverpaw and Tulippaw today."

Bluestripe nodded. "It must be great, being a mentor," she mewed. "Perhaps when these are apprenticed... Cherrykit! Swallowkit! Drizzlekit! Time to eat!"

The three kits ceased their conversation and bounded over.

"I want milk," Swallowkit pouted.

"Here, try some fresh-kill," his mother insisted. She placed the mouse in front of the kits.

"It smells yummy," Cherrykit agreed, bending over to take a nibble.

Bluestripe took a bite of the starling. "You better go get something to eat," she suggested.

Sunstorm nodded and went to the fresh-kill pile, then to the warriors' den. Lavenderpelt was the only one there as Sunstorm ate. But when she was full she felt dizzy, like she was going to be sick. Hauling herself to her paws, she padded to Emberfur's den. Darkspot was making a poultice.

"Can I help you?" Emberfur looked up as the warrior entered.

"Yes - I feel really sick all of a sudden." Sunstorm put a paw on her

belly.

"I guess I could give you willow leaves - maybe poppy seeds. Let me know if it doesn't clear up by sunup. Darkspot?"

Darkspot spit out the poultice and went to grab the herbs. The sun was beginning to dip below the horizon.

In a flash the young tom was back. Sunstorm thanked them both and went to the warriors' den, which was nearly full already. The red warrior crouched and gratefully ate the herbs. Feeling the sickness begin to ebb away, she drifted off to sleep.

Sunstorm awoke before dawn that morning, the same sudden sickness in her belly. Embarrassed to go again, she went to the medicine cat den and woke Darkspot.

"Feeling better?" he meowed wearily.

Sunstorm shook her head.

"Hmm... Emberfur?"

Emberfur awoke and stood up. She seemed to know what was wrong and padded over, a knowing glint in her eye.

"Lie on your side, Sunstorm," she mewed. Confused, she obeyed. She winced slightly as she felt the medicine cat's paws gently probe her belly.

"Just what I thought. Come here, Darkspot. I want you to feel."

Darkspot did the same.

"What is it?" Sunstorm put in. "You don't mean-"

Emberfur nodded. "You're going to have kits, Sunstorm."

Sudden fear and excitement made Sunstorm's fur prickle. "Really?" she gaped. "How many?"

Emberfur tilted her head. "It's hard to tell right now. You're only

about a half-moon in."

Sunstorm's ears pricked up. "I never expected..." she paused. "Great StarClan, I have to go tell Falconwing!" With a quick meow of thanks she pelted across camp as fast as she could manage to the warriors' den. She did not care that her mate was fast asleep.

"Falconwing! *Falconwing*! You won't believe what Emberfur just told me!"

Falconwing raised his head, drowsy and disoriented. "What?"

"I'm going to have kits!" she purred. She bumped her nose into his muzzle.

"Kits!" He shot awake, sitting straight up. "In all the stars!"

Chapter 26

Moonwhisper sighed as she scraped soiled bedding out of the elders' den. Buttonweasel was asleep, muttering as he snored. She shrugged and padded out of the den to dump out the bedding. When she was finished, she headed for Stormstar's den.

"Stormstar?" she called softly.

"Moonwhisper?"

"Yes. It's me."

There was a brief silence before Stormstar's rumbling meow sounded again. "Alright. Come in." Moonwhisper pushed through the vines at the entrance of the den without hesitation. She had been here quite recently, often coming for permission to leave the camp. Then with a happy sigh she realized her punishment was almost over.

"Do you need my permission to leave the camp again, Moonwhisper?" Stormstar asked. Moonwhisper nodded.

"If I may. I need to fetch fresh moss for the elders' den."

"Alright. Take a warrior with you, as always. After what happened to cause this punishment, you understand the importance of being watched. We don't want you going to meet some WindClan tom again."

Moonwhisper stifled a growl as she dipped her head in respect. She knew very well why she always needed another warrior with her when she strayed out of camp. But she hated when her leader constantly reminded her of her... *mistake*. She had made a promise to Beecloud to never meet or speak with Ravenfrost again. And somehow she intended to keep it.

"Anyone willing to... escort me out of camp?" she called nervously

into the warriors' den. She hated when she had to ask for a warrior herself, how the *entire* Clan knew of her punishment, and the cause of it. Even Buttonweasel constantly ranted and openly expressed how disgusted he was how a noble ThunderClan cat could *ever* love a "stinky, flea-bitten WindClan tom". Moonwhisper had almost growled at the elderly cat. He said himself he used to be their *deputy* in one of his kit nursery-tales. But then Moonwhisper had to remind herself she listened to them as an apprentice.

"Fine," someone's growl snapped Moonwhisper back to the present. "What do you need *this* time, Moonwhisper? Do you need to be escorted back to your precious WindClan tom?" As the cat emerged, Moonwhisper growled under her breath until he flicked his orange tabby tail lightly over her ear.

"Alright, alright. Beecloud, cut it out," Moonwhisper muttered, cuffing him softly over the muzzle. Beecloud's eyes danced with laughter.

"Hey, keep your fur on. I was only joking. Well, *half* joking." His eyes twinkled mischievously as he trotted out of camp. Their fight several nights before had been almost forgotten. Beecloud still half-ranted and half-joked about how she used to meet Ravenfrost, but Moonwhisper knew that he of course still had plenty reason to be upset. She had hurt him more than she ever thought was possible, and she hoped she was starting to make it up with her friendliness and talking more towards him.

"Hey, wait up! I-" She stopped mid-sentence, racing to catch up with Beecloud who had stopped. He turned towards her.

"You can't avoid it, Moonwhisper. Just say it. Or I will for you. There's no changing the past."

"Fine. I was going to say I'm still recovering from kitting," she mewed in a small voice. "So take it easy."

Beecloud stared at her for a few awkward seconds before he headed farther into the forest. "What did you need again?" he asked, not looking back.

"Moss," Moonwhisper replied. She slowly caught up to him, nodding to a moss-covered tree trunk. She padded up to it, reaching up and scraping it off with her claws. When she had collected a good sized pile, she dropped to all four paws and clamped as much moss as she could in her jaws. Beecloud wordlessly did the same and they headed back towards camp. When they reached the entrance Moonwhisper nodded to the elders' den, and Beecloud hurried over with her. She spat out the moss at the entrance to the den.

"Thanks," she meowed.

"Sure."

Moonwhisper pawed the moss pile into the den and started fixing up nests. Buttonweasel, still fast asleep, gave a sudden loud, giant snore that made the silver she-cat jump. Then she scolded herself under her breath and kept working. She scrunched up her nose at the overall reek of the den; even though she had just changed the bedding, the elders still carried with them an unpleasant scent. Moonwhisper noticed Buttonweasel was the worst, and wondered not for the first time if he ever actually kept himself well-groomed. She glanced at the old, ragged cat, and plainly decided for herself.

"All done?" Beecloud asked as Moonwhisper pushed out of the den. She nodded, turning towards her leader's den to report that she was back.

When Moonwhisper had finished her apprentice duties for the day she settled down outside the warriors' den. It was sunhigh by now, and the breeze carried a pleasant, new-leaf scent. But she knew it would be leaf-fall before long. Her ears pricked in interest as her littermate, Sunstorm, padded over to her. She sat down beside Moonwhisper and glanced at her excitedly.

Moonwhisper sighed. "Hmm?"

Sunstorm shifted her paws nervously. But her eyes glittered in unwavering excitement. "I..." Moonwhisper's gaze drifted towards her sister's stomach. She knew very well what Sunstorm was trying to tell her and she purred. But she wanted the red warrior to tell her herself.

"Sunstorm, is there anything wrong?" she inquired again.

"I'm having kits!" her sister bursted out joyously. "Imagine that! Me, having kits! I never thought! I - Falconwing, he's-"

Moonwhisper swiped her tail over Sunstorm's muzzle, rolling her eyes playfully.

"I know, Sunstorm. That's great! I'm so happy for you!" She purred loudly and began sharing tongues with her littermate, who was still chattering on about how she and Falconwing were surprised at the news.

Suddenly Moonwhisper looked up. Sunstorm stopped meowing and looked up as well. Beecloud was padding towards them, his face hard to read.

"Congratulations, Sunstorm," he meowed quickly and nodded to Moonwhisper, who glanced at her sister.

"Go," Sunstorm purred. "I bet Falconwing's looking for me anyways." Moonwhisper breathed her thanks and stepped aside with Beecloud.

"What is it?" she murmured, tilting her head in confusion.

Beecloud glanced around to make sure no one was listening or eavesdropping before replying. "I've been thinking," he began in a low voice, "in order for you to keep your promise to me, you need to take care of something first."

Moonwhisper's heart thudded. What was he talking about? "Uh - okay," she stuttered. Beecloud's expression turned to determination.

"First you better get permission to leave camp with me," he ordered.

Moonwhisper pushed out of the gorse tunnel, Beecloud's breath warm on her tail. *Why's he being so mysterious?* she wondered. When they were out of camp he took the lead, and Moonwhisper had no choice but to follow.

"What is this all about?" she demanded as she padded over the grass. The air brought with it a slight chill, promising the nearing of

leaf-fall, and leaf-bare soon after.

Beecloud didn't respond. Instead, he turned around and placed something gently on the soft grass. Moonwhisper gasped, her eyes widening in shock.

"Beecloud! What's he doing here?" she breathed, her gaze drifting to the tiny bundle on the grass. Drizzlekit was staring up at her, looking quite pleased with himself.

"How's I doing?" he squeaked to Beecloud. The warrior dropped into a crouch until he was at the kit's height.

"Very well, Drizzlekit. But remember, in order to see the surprise you must be *completely* silent, and you can't make even a single peep," Beecloud murmured. Drizzlekit nodded and clumsily swiped his silver tail over his dark muzzle.

Moonwhisper just stared at her son. How had she not seen Beecloud take him from the nursery, or bring him out of camp? Then her gaze drifted back to Beecloud and she glared at him. He met her gaze and turned around, Drizzlekit bouncing along behind him. She sighed, heading after them. With a start she realized that Beecloud was heading for the WindClan border. *Oh, no*... She could only imagine what he wanted her to do. Brushing beside him, she hissed in his orange ear.

"How could you do this, not only to me, but to Bluestripe?" she growled quietly. His dark yellow eyes locked on hers.

"You have no idea what I'm doing, Moonwhisper," he murmured steadily. Moonwhisper glanced back at Drizzlekit who was trailing behind. She slowed her pace and trotted slowly beside him. He stared up her her with the same round, icy eyes as his father.

"I'm hungry," he whimpered softly. "I want Bluestripe!" Moonwhisper's heart swelled with love for the tiny tom. He could never love her as much as she loved him, though. His love for a mother would always be to Bluestripe.

"Shh," she whispered. "We're almost at the surprise."

"Oh, okay," he mewed. "Can you carry me, though? I'm tired. But don't let me miss the surprise."

"Yes, Drizzlekit," Moonwhisper purred, picking him up by the scruff. She caught up to Beecloud, who was just slipping into a large bush at the WindClan border. Moonwhisper slipped in beside him, placing Drizzlekit at her paws. He immediately nosed into her belly, but she gently pushed him away.

"I don't have any milk," she whispered. "Not every she-cat does. Only mothers, like Bluestripe and some other queens." *And me.* Drizzlekit's shoulders sagged.

"Oh, alright. I guess I can wait for the surprise." Moonwhisper purred.

"That's right. Soon you will be back at Bluestripe's belly with your littermates."

Beecloud silenced them with a flick of his tail. Moonwhisper tasted the air. A patrol was heading their way. She also detected a faint trace of Ravenfrost's scent. He was with the patrol. *Like always*. She sighed inwardly, dreading the next few moments. As the patrol rounded the corner, Ravenfrost strayed away and slipped into the crowed bush beside Beecloud.

"What do you want?" he hissed. "Why-" His gaze rested on Drizzlekit. "Is that...?" Moonwhisper nodded, and Ravenfrost's eyes glowed like a full moon. He affectionately touched noses with Moonwhisper, who flinched away. He seemed to be ignoring Beecloud.

"What's he doing here?" he suddenly growled, baring his teeth at Beecloud. The orange tom nodded to Moonwhisper. She took a deep breath.

"We're here to sort things out. And I'm going to make it quick before your patrol sees us," she began.

Ravenfrost glanced outside the bush. "Better take your time. They won't be back anytime soon."

"Well, in that case, I guess we *will* take as much time as we need. But Drizzlekit's got to get back to his mother."

"His *mother*?" Ravenfrost hissed. "But you-" Moonwhisper silenced him with an angry flick of her tail over his mouth. She leaned in to whisper in his ear.

"He can't know yet! He can't know you're his father, either."

"Why not?" Anger flashed in the mottled tom's eyes. "Why'd you bother bringing him then?"

"Because this is how it has to be! And I thought you wanted to meet your son." She didn't bother mentioning that meeting him or even bringing Drizzlekit along was all Beecloud's idea.

Ravenfrost's ears drooped. "I guess. Fine, but who's mothering him?"

"Bluestripe."

He nodded.

"Can we go now and see the surprise?" Drizzlekit mewed from behind. "And why are you meowing in whispers? Is there something I can't hear?" His eyes brightened. "I bet it's part of the surprise!" Moonwhisper's heart seemed to twist in agony. *It will be quite a surprise, my dear Drizzlekit, when you learn of your true parents*. Instead she just nodded to the kit. Ravenfrost leaned in once more.

"He's perfect," he breathed. "Just like you." Moonwhisper shied away, and hissed.

"I can't, Ravenfrost! I can't keep meeting you!"

Ravenfrost's eyes widened in shock.

"B-But why?" he whispered, tears glistening in his eyes.

"Because I'm loyal to my Clan, unlike you. You killed my leader! I can't ever forgive you. And I can't ever forgive myself for the pain we caused Beecloud."

Ravenfrost met her gaze steadily. "I didn't kill her. She tried to save me, and then I tried to save her, Moonwhisper. I know you know it's true. You know I didn't kill her. And I *am* loyal to my Clan. But that doesn't mean I can't be loyal to you."

Moonwhisper screwed her eyes shut, pressing against him, not even caring if Beecloud would object. "I know you didn't kill her. I'm sorry. This is just so hard," she whispered.

"What?"

"The promise I made." Moonwhisper broke away and pressed her cheek to Ravenfrost's. "To never speak or meet with you again." Ravenfrost backed away, his eyes full of clear hurt.

"Who - who made you promise that?" he demanded.

"No one. But since we caused so much hurt to Beecloud, I made this promise to him."

"Moonwhisper...?" Drizzlekit whispered from behind. She ignored him and faced her forbidden mate boldly.

"You - you chose Beecloud over me?" he whispered.

Moonwhisper closed her eyes. One word, and she would lose everything she loved. Everything she and Ravenfrost had been through together would mean nothing. And so would Drizzlekit.

"Yes."

Chapter 27

Two moons had passed. A cold wind shook the forest, making the leaves rustle and the tree branches clap.

"What was that?" Cherrykit screeched in alarm as the wind blew harder.

"It's just the wind, dear," Bluestripe informed her only she-kit.

"It's scary!" Swallowkit's voice quaked in fear. All three kits huddled closer to Bluestripe, who wrapped her tail around them protectively.

"Where is Redflame?" Drizzlekit suddenly asked. The other kits nodded, telling her that they wanted to know as well. Bluestripe sighed. Redflame was never around anymore because he was the deputy.

"He must be on a patrol, or maybe talking to Stormstar," Bluestripe answered, trying to keep her meow as light as possible. Another strong gust of wind swept through the camp, rattling the nursery. "Let's go see Buttonweasel," Bluestripe suggested, knowing that it would be warmer in the elders' den as there were more cats there. The kits started to leave, bouncing excitedly. Cherrykit, who was in the lead, drew back immediately after sticking her nose out.

"It's all wet! Water is falling out of the sky!" the little she-kit screamed and ran back to Bluestripe.

"It's called rain, my sweet," Bluestripe purred to her kit.

"It's cold! I don't like it," Cherrykit announced.

"Well, come and get warm," Bluestripe swept her kits to her belly. A crack of lightning filled the air with the smell of burnt wood.

"What was *that?*" Drizzlekit whispered. Nuzzling closer to Bluestripe, he and the other kits started to suckle.

"It is just a storm; it'll blow away soon."

Drizzlekit nodded. The brambles shivered, and a dripping Tulippaw pushed in.

"I brof you fwesh-kiwl," she muttered through a mouthful of fur.

"Thank you, Tulippaw." Bluestripe accepted the fresh-kill, and Tulippaw walked out of the den. She gulped down the thin squirrel, then curled around her kits, who were now sleeping. The storm continued. It was leaf-bare.

Crash! A bolt of lightning cracked the sky. Bluestripe and the kits woke with a start. Bluestripe sniffed the air. *Fire.* A loud crack split through the forest, and Bluestripe could tell it wasn't lightning.

"Get out!" she screeched to her kits. A large tree branch crashed into the nursery. Swallowkit was the last thing Bluestripe saw before the bramble walls surrounded her, blinding her, choking her.

"Mother," Cherrykit wailed, "Come *ouutt*."

"Heeelppp!" Drizzlekit yelled around the camp. Stormstar ran out of his den.

"What happened? Where's your mother?" he meowed to the three kits.

"She didn't come out..." Swallowkit shook his pelt.

"Follow me," Stormstar whisked around and led the kits to his den, where Redflame was. "Redflame! Get some warriors - Bluestripe is stuck under the nursery. Get her out! *Now!*" Redflame jerked his head up and ran out of the den.

"Oakleaf, Swiftclaw, Tulippaw, Irispaw, Strongheart, come with me! The nursery collapsed on Bluestripe!" he yowled as he raced past the dens. The cats steamed out of their dens. "Oakleaf and Swiftclaw, start digging over here," he pointed with his tail to a spot. "The rest of you dig with me!" he started pulling the brambles and vines out.

"Redflame! I think I found the tip of her tail!" Irispaw called to the deputy.

"Show me where." He went to the side where the apprentice was. "Go get Emberfur and Darkspot." he meowed tautly. Irispaw scampered away. "Swiftclaw, Oakleaf, over here." he started digging again. *She's going to be okay,* He told himself firmly. Digging steadily, the cats finally managed to clear the brambles away. She lay there, on her side, with her leg twisted toward her stomach. A thin trickle of blood ran from her cheek.

"Bluestripe?" Redflame whispered, sniffing his mate.

"Out of my way." Emberfur pushed through the cats crowded around Bluestripe. "Take her to my den. Carefully." Emberfur followed as the warriors brought her into the medicine cat den.

"Is she going to be alright?" Redflame demanded as the other warriors set her down in a warm moss nest.

"I-I don't know yet, I don't even know what happened!" She sprang up and padded over to her stores, sniffing and pushing herbs out of the way with her paws. Then she returned with a bundle of green herbs in her jaws. Pelting over to Bluestripe, she carefully opened the queen's jaws and tipped the herbs in.

"What did you give her?" Redflame asked her nervously as Bluestripe swallowed weakly.

"Thyme," the wise old medicine cat explained. "For shock."

Darkspot rushed over with a thick wad of cobwebs in his jaws and began to compress them on Bluestripe's wounds. The worst one was over her eye; Bluestripe felt a stab of pain from it as it was bandaged.

"Do you think my littermates' warrior ceremony will be delayed because the nursery collapsed?" Darkspot breathed as he went looking for another herb. "It was supposed to be at sunhigh. It should nearly be that now."

"Perhaps for a little while," Emberfur mewed.

"G-Get S-Sunstorm," Bluestripe meowed weakly. "M-My kits..."

"Will she be alright?" Redflame demanded, curling his tail protectively around the three kits. Darkspot went to go find Sunstorm.

"Yes, she will," Emberfur replied. "Except..."

"Except what?" Redflame's hackles raised in extreme panic.

"I'm worried about her eye," Emberfur finished, her green eyes burrowing into his.

"Will she go blind?" he whispered. "In that eye?"

Emberfur shut her eyes thoughtfully. "Only time will tell," she told the deputy heavily. There was genuine pain in her voice. "I cannot be sure. I'm nearly out of celandine."

Tears sparkled in Redflame's eyes; Darkspot pushed into the medicine cat den with Sunstorm trotting at his side.

"Bluestripe!" her sister croaked. "Great StarClan! What's happened to her?"

"The nursery collapsed on her," Oakleaf explained.

"Sunstorm, please t-take care of my k-kits," meowed Bluestripe hoarsely. "While I-I'm injured, at least."

Sunstorm dipped her head. "Of course, sister," she mewed. "Anything I can do to help."

Redflame bumped his head into her gratefully, relief sparkling in his worried eyes.

"There, Bluestripe - just keep your eye open," Darkspot instructed, carefully pouring juice from a leaf-wrap into the damaged eye. "Can you see anything through it?"

"Nothing," Bluestripe answered vaguely.

Emberfur had gone out to collect more of the precious herb. Darkspot was relieved to find the queen's vision better than before, though she could hardly see anything. Perhaps she *would* get better, he thought. He hadn't had to go through the pain of losing a Clanmate yet.

Bluestripe's eye still ached; when Redflame wasn't on or ordering patrols or hunting he was often in the medicine cat den, his tail flicking worriedly the whole time he talked with his mate. She could hear the cheery yowls of her three kits, from the sound of it trying to pin down Sunstorm's tail. Her heart hurt; that should be her, not her sister.

"May all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting," rang Stormstar's voice from the rough center of camp. *The warrior ceremony*.

"I want to go," Bluestripe whispered softly to Darkspot.

"Sure," he meowed. "Just be careful when you get up..."

He helped her haul herself to her paws by sinking his teeth into her scruff, then carefully led her to where the crowd was gathered. Duskpaw, Scarpaw, and Beaverpaw were in front, eyes glowing. There was a faint glow of jealousy in Darkspot's eyes, but it was barely noticeable. The rest was pure happiness for his littermates.

"I, Stormstar, leader of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have trained hard to learn to ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn," the black tom began. His eyes turned to Scarpaw, who seemed on the brink of explosion.

"Scarpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and protect your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Scarpaw glanced up at his leader solemnly. "I do," he answered.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Scarpaw, from this moment you will be known as Scartooth. StarClan honors your loyalty and fierceness, and we welcome you

as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

Stormstar laid his muzzle on the warrior, and Scartooth licked him respectfully.

"Duskpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and protect your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," the apprentice meowed at once.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Duskpaw, from this moment you will be known as Duskfeather. StarClan honors your brilliant hunting skills, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

Duskfeather gave Stormstar the same respectful lick.

"Beaverpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and protect your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Beaverpaw dipped his head. "I do," he meowed.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Beaverpaw, from this moment you will be known as Beaverpelt. StarClan honors your swift skill, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

"Scartooth! Duskfeather! Beaverpelt!" the crowd cheered. "Scartooth! Duskfeather! Beaverpelt!"

Stormstar flicked his tail and Darkspot went over to them, congratulating his littermates.

"Come on, kits. She's in here."

Bluestripe heard her sister's voice and then the sound of pawsteps as she sat up from her nest. She saw both Sunstorm and her kits out of her good eye.

"Is she gonna be okay, Sunstorm?" Swallowkit squeaked.

Sunstorm raised her eyes to Silverpelt. "StarClan knows," she replied

heavily. Then she turned to her littermate. "Do Fogcloud and Moonwhisper know?" she asked hoarsely.

"Yes. Darkspot told them," she answered. The young tom was sorting herbs.

"And Redflame?"

"Him too." Bluestripe sighed.

Sunstorm padded up to Bluestripe and licked her forehead. "It will be alright. You'll see," she assured her.

Chapter 28

"My paws are cold," Irispaw groaned. The ground was soggy from rain and clouds held the promise of a coming storm. "Is it true you're going to have kits? Shouldn't you be in the nursery by now?"

"I will, once you're a warrior and the nursery's rebuilt," Sunstorm replied. "It'll be nearly done by now."

"But Littlerose's kits are just barely warriors and they're so much older," sighed the apprentice. "It will be *ages*."

Sunstorm rolled her eyes with a purr. "Persistent as always."

They reached the gorse barrier and pushed through. The nursery was mostly repaired, and Tulippaw was holding a bundle of brambles while patting some down to form a wall.

"Fa forns hurf mah mouf," she grumbled through her mouthful of it.

"You're doing fine," Redflame assured her. "Try holding them more with your teeth instead."

Tulippaw scrambled awkwardly to find footing while she shifted her grip on the brambles. "Fhaf's beffer," she nodded. "Whaf parf next?"

Redflame stood back to see which parts had to most holes. "Near the top, in the back," he decided. "Patch up the hole and fill it in with bracken."

Tulippaw let out out a sulky moan and climbed up to the spot he had indicated, balancing on her hind paws in order to be high enough to spread the brambles over the hole.

Sunstorm turned around and saw Flintpaw return with a wad of bracken in his mouth. He bounded over to the older apprentice and placed it next to her. Tulippaw picked it up and began stuffing little tufts of it in the gaps in between the brambles.

"I'm going to go eat," Irispaw told her mentor. "Acornpaw told me Bluestripe and the elders are fed already."

"Help yourself," Sunstorm nodded. Bluestripe and her kits were temporarily sleeping in the elders' den; it was too loud in the warriors' and apprentices' dens. With only three elders there was plenty of room for them to make a comfortable nest.

"How far along are you now?" a voice interrupted her thoughts behind her.

She turned to face Falconwing. "Really close," she informed him. "A little under a half-moon."

"I can hardly wait!" Falconwing seemed to bounce off of the ground. "I'm going to be a father, Sunstorm!"

"And hopefully you can teach your kits to be patient," she teased, gently rubbing her flank against his.

"Are you feeling well?" he asked her. "Do you need poppy seeds or anything?"

Sunstorm sighed. He seemed to be getting more and more critical about her health the closer to kitting she became. "I'm fine," she assured him. "Sometimes I get a little sick in the mornings is all."

"Well... Okay," he replied, apparently unconvinced as usual.

Sunstorm glanced down at her belly, which seemed to be getting slowly heavier with each sunrise. She wondered how many kits there were; how many she-cats and how many toms. It seemed too much for her to bear.

"Do you think you should move in with Bluestripe while the nursery's being built?" her mate asked her.

"No. It won't be long anyway. Bluestripe just needs the quiet because her kits are so young; I'm only one cat."

"I can ask Stormstar to excuse you from patrols and hunting if you like," he meowed. "I can take up Irispaw's training."

"I'm just fine, Falconwing!" she purred. "Irispaw won't have to wait a half-moon, even. I can train perfectly until then - I just need to take it easy. She can always practice battle moves with Patchpaw and Flintpaw to sharpen her skills, if you like."

"How about tomorrow?" he offered.

"Great," Sunstorm purred. "Besides, the less time I spend in the nursery before my kitting, the better. I'll be stuck in there for six moons anyway."

"Falconwing!"

"Yes, Redflame?" Falconwing responded to the deputy.

"I'm going to need you to lead a hunting patrol," Redflame told him. "Take... Let's see... Grasspelt, Moonwhisper, Patchpaw, and Acornpaw."

"Sure." Falconwing nodded and called the cats to him with a flick of his tail. Then he headed out of the gorse tunnel.

"How do you deal with him jumping in your fur all day?" Fogcloud snarled playfully. "You almost look glad to have him occupied."

"No. It's just that he's anxious because he's never had kits before," Sunstorm flicked her tail in a friendly fashion. "Redflame was the same way, and I'm sure when you have kits you will be too. I'm just as nervous, but I show it differently."

"Who said I'm going to have kits?" her brother bristled. But then he let his fur lay flat, looking embarrassed.

Sunstorm looked interested. "What's the matter with you?" she asked. "Surely you consider Tinyblossom your mate by now?"

"Tinyblossom?" Fogcloud forced a snort. "No way. She's a good friend," he insisted.

"Good friend, hm?" Sunstorm nodded. "Okay."

"What's so funny?"

Sunstorm shook her head. "Never mind." She bumped her muzzle against his cheek.

Fogcloud looked curious as to what she had meant but said nothing.

"Why is the ground still wet if it isn't raining?" a tiny voice squeaked from the direction of the elders' den.

Swallowkit was holding a tiny forepaw just above the soaked bracken, his face twisted up in disgust.

"It doesn't get dry immediately, darling," Bluestripe told him. "When the sun comes out, the water goes away."

"Where does it go?" Cherrykit piped up. Bluestripe let out a *mrow* of laughter.

"No one really knows for sure," she shrugged. "It just... goes."

Both kits tipped their heads to the side while Drizzlekit stared at the sky in interest.

"What are you looking at?" Bluestripe asked her foster son.

"I's looking at the clouds," he told her. "Is Silverpelt really behind 'em?"

"Yes, Drizzlekit. All the warriors of StarClan shimmer brightly when the clouds drift away. You should see it." She sighed dreamily.

Drizzlekit looked up at the clouds in wonder, eyes glimmering. He looked exactly like a WindClan warrior sitting there, Ravenfrost's frosted blue eyes glimmering through Moonwhisper's silver pelt. *Someday*, thought Sunstorm, *he will notice that he is not like his siblings*.

"Hi Sunstorm!" Swallowkit piped up, as if he had just noticed her. "Are you going to have kits? They're going to be our *kin*!" he added to Cherrykit and Drizzlekit, who nodded ecstatically.

Sunstorm and Fogcloud padded up to the little kits.

"Yes, and you can come and see them once they're born," the red queen told them.

"*Right* after they're born?" Cherrykit asked hopefully.

Sunstorm let out a *mrow* of laughter. "Perhaps," she mewed.

"There," Tulippaw panted at last. "Is that good, Redflame?"

Redflame looked up from his conversation with Oakleaf and nodded. "Is it sturdy?" he asked.

Tulippaw gingerly pressed a paw to the surface of the brambles, then pressed harder. Redflame nodded.

"Pretty sturdy."

"Let me check." Redflame stood up, flicked his tail to excuse himself, and padded across to the first part of the nursery. He pushed the thick of the brambles to test their sturdiness.

"It's very sturdy," he concluded. "Good as new. Fantastic, Tulippaw."

"Thanks," Tulippaw purred sheepishly. "I have some leftover bracken. Should I take it to Darkspot?"

"No, no - take it to the elders," Redflame told her, coming out of the nursery. "Then tell Patchpaw and Flintpaw to put it around Bluestripe's nest to make it more comfortable."

"Okay." Tulippaw bounded down to the ground and picked up the bundle of bracken, then trotted over to the fallen tree where the elders as well as Bluestripe and her kits were sitting. Just then, Flintpaw returned from hunting with a dead water vole dangling from his mouth.

"Redflame says to make a nest for Bluestripe in the nursery," Tulippaw meowed.

Flintpaw dropped the water vole on the fresh-kill pile and went over to the nursery. Soon his head popped back out.

"Your nest is ready," he told the blue-grey warrior and her kits.

"Come on, kits," Bluestripe purred. The three little cats teetered after their mother, Redflame glancing after his children and his mate proudly. Sunstorm followed her sister and entered the brambles of the elders den, the cool shade feeling good on her rather dark pelt. She chose the nest near the right. The queens' nests were laid with extra moss and feathers. But as she sank into it it felt no different than the warriors den with her large, round belly awkwardly tucked into the nest. She felt so comfortable there, however, that she sank into a deep nap.

Sunstorm awoke to both unfamiliar voices and scents. Through a gap in the brambles she could see a grey tom with deep brown eyes near the gorse barrier, with other cats standing behind him.

"What's that smell?" Drizzlekit mewed excitedly, happy to experience such a strange, new scent.

"Hush," Bluestripe hissed. "That is Creekstar, leader of RiverClan."

Stormstar stood across from him, his black pelt rippling in the weak silver light of leaf-bare. Falconwing seemed to be inching toward the nursery behind him.

"Have you come bearing a message?" Stormstar asked him carefully. The tone in his voice was unreadable.

"You may call it that, Stormstar," Creekstar began, "but we have come to discuss Sunningrocks. It has been seasons now since RiverClan has negotiated with ThunderClan. We have come to propose an agreement."

"An agreement?" Stormstar's ears pricked. "What sort of agreement?"

"If you allow RiverClan to keep Sunningrocks as part of our territory, none of your warriors will get hurt," Creekstar mewed smoothly. "We have not come to spill blood."

"And give up without a fight?" Stormfoot snarled. "Never!"

"Fools!" a sandy tom with blue eyes spat.

"Lynxwhisker, I did *not* give you permission to speak!" Creekstar hissed, his broad head whipping around to face the warrior. "This is between Stormstar and I."

Lynxwhisker flexed his claws threateningly but said nothing. By the look of it, he would like nothing more than to sink his teeth into ThunderClan flesh.

"If you think ThunderClan is going to hand over its territory, I am afraid you are mistaken," Stormstar went on, his voice as oily as Creekstar's. Meows of agreement swept through the crowd of ThunderClan cats, especially from Redflame.

Sunstorm felt a powerful ripple through her body, surprising her and making her shake. She dug her claws into the moss of her nest and her ears flattened, biting her tongue to keep herself still.

"You are the one who has made the mistake," Creekstar hissed. "Unless you wish to engage in battle with my warriors."

Stormstar stuck his claws into the ground, hackles rising, and all the ThunderClan warriors with him.

"They can't fight!" Bluestripe protested in an urgent whisper. "Not now!"

A shock pulsed through Sunstorm's body again. Bluestripe noticed and she looked at her sister with sympathetic eyes.

"Oh no!" she cried. "It can't be - is it - your kits?"

Sunstorm's eyes widened. "I d-don't know," she stammered, her claws digging deeper and deeper into the bracken.

"I'll fetch Emberfur or Darkspot," Bluestripe breathed. "Kits, stay here. *Do not move*."

"I wanna see the fight!" Swallowkit protested.

"Absolutely not!" Bluestripe flicked her tail and raced off through the bracken tunnel of the nursery, meowing something to Falconwing outside before dashing into the nearby medicine

clearing. Both Clans were tensing; Sunstorm hoped a fight would not break out. Not now, while she was about to start kitting!

It was a heartbeat before Darkspot was pelting into the elders den, Emberfur close behind him with a bundle of herbs. The latter dropped them nearby.

"Deep breaths, Sunstorm - Darkspot, it's time."

"Time for what?" Darkspot's voice rose in sudden fear.

"I'll let you handle this. I'll watch."

Falconwing rushed after them, his whiskers twitching in panic. Sunstorm took a breath as deep as her lungs would allow and pushed, a ripple of pain coursing through her body. Darkspot gingerly placed his paws on her belly and felt what was there, then gently pushed.

"Keep pushing..."

He sounded uncertain, but Emberfur looked perfectly confident. A surge of courage filled Sunstorm's heart and she obeyed, her flank heaving with the effort. She felt she was going to be knocked unconscious when a small, wet bundle fell into the nest.

"A tom!" Darkspot exclaimed in relief that he had delivered his first kit. The fluid from the little sac that had encased it soaked into the little kit's body.

"Don't just stand there like a dead fox, start licking it!" Emberfur ordered. Darkspot jumped and ran his tongue over the tiny creature, nipping its sac, until the little head started to lift. Falconwing let out a gasp of joy and reassurance.

"Looks like there are a couple more coming. Keep pushing," Darkspot ordered. Sunstorm took a deep breath and kept on breathing, her vision seeming to go foggy.

"Bite down on this." Emberfur set a stick near Sunstorm's muzzle. She sniffed it and clenched it in her jaws, biting down harder and harder until it began to splinter.

Another bundle fell into the nest. Darkspot quickly handed the first kit to Falconwing, who starting licking the tom furiously, and then the medicine cat himself nipped the sac covering the second kit.

"Falconwing! We need you in the battle!" Redflame pushed into the tunnel urgently. "You're one of our best warriors!"

Falconwing looked at him pleadingly. "I can't!" he told him. "My mate is kitting!"

Redflame looked pensive for a moment, then nodded. "Very well - I'll have to ask Flintpaw and Patchpaw to fight."

"A she-kit!" Falconwing declared before starting to lick the second kit.

Before long yet another bundle arrived - a tom - and Darkspot felt her belly.

"That's all of them," the medicine cat declared breathlessly.

"Quickly now," Emberfur told him. "I can hear fighting. We better go help. Here." She pushed a small bundle of leaves next to Sunstorm's muzzle. "Eat these."

The queen nodded and quickly lapped them up, sinking into a deep, deep sleep.

The sound of claws and snarling outside was beginning to fade. She woke up to the sound of newborn kits and it surprised her for a heartbeat until she peered at her belly and realized that yes, there really were mewling kits there, kneading her belly as they suckled.

"Are you alright?" Falconwing asked her in a shaky voice the moment she opened her eyes. "Do you think you're ready to name them?"

There was more passion and pride in his voice than Sunstorm had ever heard before. He was gazing at his kits with the greatest love she head ever seen in her mate, who was Stormstar's son.

"Name them?" It had completely slipped her mind. "Of course."

She looked at the first kit - a tom - who was the perfect image his father. His fur was a mottled greyish-brown and his paws churned powerfully for his age as he suckled. They were all small, she noticed, for being born a half-moon early.

"He looks just like you," Sunstorm purred. "So he needs a name like his father. I will call him Eaglekit."

Falconwing's eyes shone. "It's perfect," he agreed.

The next kit was the tiny she-kit; she was a snowy white like Vinestripe's mother in StarClan, Riverspeck.

"She looks just like the ice of leaf-bare!" Falconwing declared. "How about Icekit?"

"No, no... I like Frostkit better," Sunstorm decided.

"Frostkit, then," Falconwing agreed with a curt nod. "Even better."

The last kit was a grey tom, rather like Vinestripe except for faint tabby markings here and there. He was the smallest and weakest-looking of his siblings.

"How about Alderkit?" Falconwing suggested. "His fur is as grey as the bark of an alder tree."

"Perfect." Sunstorm gently nosed each one of her kits, quietly repeating each name. "Eaglekit... Frostkit... Alderkit." Falconwing licked each tiny head.

"I will treasure you forever, my little ones," he whispered.

Chapter 29

Moonwhisper jumped into the heat of the battle. How could RiverClan even *dare* attacking ThunderClan in their own camp? She thought they had more sense than that! She let out a furious snarl, jumping onto Lynxwhisker's back. He yelped in surprise, losing his footing. Moonwhisper growled in defiance. *Take that, mange-pelt!* But the sandy warrior soon regained his footing, sinking his claws into the ground. His lips parted in a snarl, and he reared up, knocking Moonwhisper from his back. She landed with a thud in the dust. Lynxwhisker stood over her, a grin forming on his face.

"Sunningrocks is *ours!*" he yowled, raising a paw to swipe at Moonwhisper's silver face. She rolled away just in time, and the RiverClan warrior's claws swiped at the air instead. He stomped back over to Moonwhisper, yowling furiously. Moonwhisper rolled under him, batting at his stomach with her paws until she felt the fresh spray of blood splatter on her face. Lynxwhisker shrieked in pain, clutching his stomach with his paw. Blood soaked his pale fur.

"I'll get you, someday, you fox-heart!" he croaked before fleeing out of the camp. Moonwhisper let out a pleased growl. Another RiverClan cat was soon on top of her.

"How dare you harm my father!" the cat shrieked. "How. *Dare.* You!" The RiverClan cat swiped her paws violently at Moonwhisper, who yowled in pain. She threw the cat off to get a good look at her. *An apprentice.* Her calico coat was matted with sticky blood.

"My father might die because of you!" The apprentice's words came out in a sob. Moonwhisper rolled her eyes.

"Got a medicine cat, mouse-brain?" she taunted. "Can they not heal your father?" The she-cat yowled and leaped onto Moonwhisper, who staggered under the apprentice's surprising weight.

"Our medicine cat can't heal a wound that deep!" she retorted through a mouthful of Moonwhisper's fur. Moonwhisper clawed her

off her back. The small she-cat tumbled onto the ground, but sprang up immediately.

Moonwhisper crouched, ready to meet this cat head-on. The RiverClan apprentice did the same. Moonwhisper pounced, pleased to feel that her claws had met flesh. The young cat yowled in pain as Moonwhisper ripped out a large clump of her calico fur. She turned tail and fled out of camp.

Moonwhisper heaved in breaths, her gaze wandering the battle scene around her. Redflame tussled with a large grey and white tom, fur flying everywhere. Moonwhisper winced as she saw Redflame gasp in agony as the grey RiverClan warrior raked him across the side. She threw herself in front of Redflame, slashing furiously at the tom. She slashed at his face, and he stumbled to the ground as Moonwhisper's claw caught his eye. Blood oozed from the eye she had cut, and she couldn't help but feel a pang of guilt. But when the warrior looked up at her, she gasped in horror when she realized he only *had* one eye. She must have completely taken his eye out. Scarlet blood splattered the tom's grey face, and it dripped slowly to the ground, staining the melting snow red. He growled menacingly.

"Fox-heart," he whispered before his Clanmate dragged him out of camp by his scruff. The now one-eyed warrior continued to shriek in agony, and Moonwhisper screwed her eyes shut.

"Moonwhisper..." She whirled around to see Redflame still standing beside her. He had a pure look of horror on his face. "You just..."

"I know," she snapped bitterly. "I-I can't control myself anymore.... And I severely wounded another warrior, I think..." She gulped in panic. "Redflame, I-I..."

"It's okay," he murmured carefully. "Battles are fought like this. For... some cats..."

"But I can't fight like this!" Moonwhisper yowled. "How have I become so - so *savage*?" she whimpered.

"Moonwhisper, you were defending your camp!" Redflame pointed

out. "Accidents happen! And you were defending *me*. You may have just saved my life. So I thank you."

Moonwhisper fought back panic. "B-but what if it wasn't an accident?" she suddenly whispered, her voice barely audible over the sound of screeching cats.

"Don't be ridiculous-"

Moonwhisper turned on Redflame. "But what if it *wasn't*?" she repeated, hissing. She gazed around her camp. It was too much. Too much fighting, too much blood. And for what? A patch of rocks? A little extra land for sun and prey? She rushed into the heart of the battle. Her lungs were threatening to tighten, and she fought back the urge to cough. She heaved in breaths, hoping her breathing would steady. She suddenly raised her head, and at the top of her lungs, she yowled, "*Stop!*" Every cat stopped mid-fight to stare at her.

"What are you *doing*?" Stormstar hissed, pushing his way through the battered cats to reach Moonwhisper.

"Stop this madness!" she choked. "I don't want any cat to die in this battle!" she added in a whisper.

Stormstar stared at her. "What madness?" he demanded. "The only madness here is that RiverClan decided that Sunningrocks was theirs, and then decided to attack in our own camp! *That's* madness!" He raised his voice. "They have no honor! Attacking in another Clan's camp is cowardly and will not be tolerated!" He marched up to Creekstar. "I don't know what you were were thinking, Creekstar, but I think Moonwhisper's right. No more blood needs to be shed in this battle today. I think we have proved we can keep Sunningrocks. If you think the battle has not been won, then we will fight again. *Away* from my camp. Now leave," he demanded. "We *will* fight again, but not now. Not here. *Leave*."

Creekstar just looked at him in shock. "*We* are not cowardly," he hissed. "Your *warrior* is for stopping this battle! And I am not going home - not now. We will return to RiverClan once this battle is won!" He gazed at his warriors. They were bloody and covered in

grit from the melting snow. "However, I must agree that too much blood has been shed. That is why I wish to battle you alone." Moonwhisper saw the RiverClan warriors stare at each other in shock. They were hiding something, not telling something important...

Stormstar stood up straight, his fur bristling. "Fine," he hissed. "Warriors! Back away! I don't want any of you getting more injured!" The ThunderClan cats looked at each other anxiously, but backed away from the Clan leaders.

Moonwhisper felt her heart thudding. This battle between the leaders was her fault. If she hadn't stopped the initial battle, maybe they would have already won...

Stormstar leaped at Creekstar immediately. He stumbled, but regained his balance. His fur bristled, and he snarled in fury. He dived under Stormstar, tripping him, and bit into one of his legs. Stormstar yowled in pain, and his leg started dripping scarlet blood. He hissed in fury and leaped onto Creekstar's back. Creekstar tried to rip him off with his teeth, but Stormstar dug his claws deeper into the RiverClan leader's flesh.

"Do you surrender Sunningrocks?" Stormstar demanded.

"Never!" Creekstar snarled, once again trying to throw ThunderClan's leader off. But Stormstar held on.

"When do you surrender?" Stormstar yowled.

"Never! Never, never, *never*!" Creekstar hissed. "I will fight to the death. That's what this is, Stormstar. In this battle, there are no surrenders! We will fight to the death, mange-pelt!"

Moonwhisper saw that Stormstar looked taken aback. She was shocked herself. Why would the RiverClan leader not just surrender?

"Fine," Stormstar growled. "Then we will fight to the death." The surrounding bloody cats yowled in protest.

"That's cowardly!"

"That's against the warrior code!"

"And-" Someone silenced the cat.

Moonwhisper watched the horrible glint of hatred shine in Creekstar's eye. Was he really willing to *die*, for something as simple as *Sunningrocks*?

Creekstar finally managed to throw Stormstar off. Stormstar landed with a sickening thud in the bloody snow. He gasped for air, and Creekstar was soon on top of him. The RiverClan leader raised his paw, unsheathing his claws even more, and swiped viciously at Stormstar's face. Blood swelled on the young leader's muzzle. Creekstar then reared up and came crashing down onto Stormstar's belly, digging his claws into the black tom's flesh as he landed.

Moonwhisper screwed her eyes shut. She couldn't bare to see her leader die. She heard Stormshadow gasp in agony as Creekstar bit down once again, harder than ever this time, onto the same leg he had bit before. Creekstar tore out a clump of Stormstar's flesh. Moonwhisper gagged and turned her head.

"I-I thought we were fighting to the death," Stormstar coughed. Moonwhisper glanced at her leader, then shut her eyes immediately when she saw that his back leg was soaked with blood. "Why make me suffer more?"

"Oh, we are fighting to the death, alright," Creekstar snarled. "And Sunningrocks will finally be RiverClan's!" A spark caught in Stormstar's pain-wrenched eye. Suddenly, he heaved himself to his paws and drove his claws into Creekstar's neck. Moonwhisper gasped in horror when Stormstar lifted his head to bite down hard into the RiverClan leader's neck. Creekstar tried in vain to shake Stormstar's grip, but it was no use. He heaved a thundering sigh and slouched to the ground, a trickle of blood streaming from his neck.

Stormstar released his grip and stared blankly down at the RiverClan leader. Suddenly Creekstar jumped to his paws and stumbled into Stormstar, biting down on his neck. Stormstar screeched as Creekstar bit down harder, then slumped to the ground with Creekstar beside him.

All the cats fell silent. Creekstar and Stormstar lay unmoving in the red snow, blood trickling steadily from both of their necks. A lilac she-cat broke the silence.

"They're *both* dead," she whispered.

"Wait, look," Moonwhisper urged. Stormstar spasmed, then blinked open his brown eyes. He staggered to his paws, but when he put pressure on the leg Creekstar had bit, he gasped and fell back to the ground.

"Out of my way!" Emberfur snapped, shoving all the crowed cats away. "I need to treat Stormstar!" She turned to Darkspot and ordered, "Find some cobwebs and burdock root. Now. All other cats need to back away!" she added. Darkspot nodded and dashed into the medicine den, returning with a massive heap of cobwebs and some burdock root in his jaws. "Thanks," Emberfur meowed briskly, taking the cobwebs and burdock root from Darkspot.

As Moonwhisper backed away, she spotted Stormstar's injured leg. She gasped in horror when she saw how badly Creekstar had actually injured him. A chunk of his flesh had been ripped clean off, and the bone was clearly exposed. Moonwhisper shuddered, fleeing into her den. Redflame padded up beside her.

"What have you done?" he murmured.

"What do you mean?" Moonwhisper whispered. She faced the deputy boldly. "I-I never meant for it to come to this! I just wanted the battle for Sunningrocks to be over!"

Redflame met her icy gaze steadily. "You should never had stopped the original battle," he mewed. "Now Creekstar is dead, and Stormstar is severely injured."

"Well, maybe Creekstar just lost one life," Moonwhisper pointed out.

"I have a feeling it was his *last* life," Redflame retorted. "He would have already woken up by now if he had just lost one life. This might never have even happened if you had just let the battle play out fairly!"

Moonwhisper took a step back. She never meant for this to happen; all she had wanted was for the battle over Sunningrocks to be over, to be won. She had wanted all of her Clanmates to be safe. And yet the result of her interference had been worse than she had ever imagined. She gulped, blinking rapidly in the fading sun. Stormstar was severely injured.

And the leader of RiverClan was dead.

Chapter 30

Bluestripe padded out of the elder's den and stretched. Sighing, she padded to her mate, Redflame, who was busy getting a hunting patrol ready.

"May I go on a hunting patrol?" Bluestripe gazed into his deep hazel eyes hopefully.

"Will you be alright? Don't the kits - *our* kits - need you?" He turned around and mewed.

"I just want to get out of camp - for awhile at least. I've been stuck here for moons," she mewed back earnestly. "I'll be fine." Redflame nodded.

"Swiftclaw, Oakleaf, Bluestripe is going with you on patrol. Take Willowtuft with you." He looked around, and decided that the patrol was good.

The two warriors followed Bluestripe through the gorse tunnel. For one shocked instant she nearly tripped on the fallen trunk at the entrance; she still could not see out of one of her eyes.

Willowtuft padded ahead. She was still getting used to her new home outside camp now that her kits were apprentices. She flattened her ears in an attempt to let the wild wind sweep past her. Stormstar had been mentoring her.

"I can't believe Sunstorm had to kit in the middle of leaf-bare," Swiftclaw mewed softly.

"Do you still think you can hunt, Bluestripe?" Oakleaf asked. Ever since Maplestar - his sister - had died, he had never been the same. He looked older than ever and grey fur started to grow around his muzzle.

"Of course I can," Bluestripe flicked her ears irritably. "I've still got

my ears and whiskers."

"No need to be snippy," Willowtuft pushed. "I'll need some help too. Where to first?"

Swiftclaw paused to drink in the icy air. "The stream, perhaps," she suggested. "There may be some rabbits hiding in burrows there."

"Who said you were leading this patrol?" Oakleaf asked her interestedly.

Bluestripe thought she scented a hare near Fourtrees and began her hunting crouch, following her nose and ears. She could not see the prey, which was on the side of her bad eye. She pounced but collapsed onto the frost, chest heaving.

"Not enough jump," Swiftclaw told her. "It ran into the brambles."

"Mouse dung," Bluestripe muttered.

Willowtuft had a water vole dangling from her jaws and padded over. She dropped it and pressed her muzzle against Bluestripe's. "It's alright," she soothed her. "It was a good try."

"But not good enough!" Bluestripe spat through frustration. Then she realized her outburst and began to purr. "I'm sorry, Willowtuft. It's just that... I used to be so much better..."

"Your eye will heal," meowed the sandy-colored warrior. "Darkspot said so."

Sunhigh was approaching by the time the patrol was nearly done. The others had caught a couple of measly morsels, and Bluestripe had managed to catch a young thrush that had fallen out of its nest. Feeling that it didn't count because it was so skimpy, she hoped Willowtuft might help her.

"Don't try to see," she suggested. "Close your eyes so you don't focus on it."

"Okay." Bluestripe smelled a dove nearby, making her mouth water. It smelled big and healthy.

"Go on," Willowtuft whispered encouragingly, giving her a small nudge with her tail.

Bluestripe shut her eyes, letting the scent of the bird engulf her and padded toward where it was strongest while being downwind. Feeling each pawstep touch the icy forest floor, she could feel the dove's gentle movements as it pecked at a cluster of seeds on the ground.

She pounced.

She didn't jump as far as she meant to, but her jaws closed around its wing. She bit harder and harder until she heard a snap and then swatted it with her paws until it thumped on the ground. Opening her eyes, she looked down at the fresh-kill.

"Great job!" Willowtuft snatched up her water vole.

Hot blood seeped through the fur on Bluestripe's paws. She felt triumphant. *Maybe I'll pluck out some feathers to line nests with*, she thought happily.

"I'll give these to the elders," Oakleaf told them through his full mouth. "Let's see... Bluestripe, since you're a queen, you can eat that. Willowtuft, take that water vole to Sunstorm."

"Sure, Oakleaf." Both cats went over to the elders' den. Swiftclaw dropped hers on the fresh-kill pile and picked out a shrew.

"Come here, Bluestripe," Emberfur insisted as soon as she had started toward the elders' den.

"More celandine?" she guessed.

"You can never be too careful. Now keep your eye open and try not to blink."

Bluestripe did as she was told, struggling to stare at Emberfur's face as the medicine cat carefully squeezed out the juice of the yellow flowers. At first it stung, and then came the sweet relief of the herb and Bluestripe closed her eyes.

Sunstorm's kits were in the nursery sleeping, as they were weak from being born late in leaf-bare. Eaglekit was the strongest and was almost ready to open his eyes, but Bluestripe felt sorry for the first-time queen. Falconwing was curled beside her, grooming her gently.

Buttonweasel was grooming himself in a corner while Windpelt and Littlestripe gossiped; they had been best friends since they were apprenticed. They were grateful that the nursery had been repaired and they now had enough room. It was too crowded to think in there.

Darkspot handed over Sunstorm's kits to her. "Here," he meowed. "I think Alderkit may survive, but he'll need help."

"Thank you." Sunstorm shut her eyes and took her weakest kit in her jaws, then licked Frostkit.

"Home!" Drizzlekit squealed happily, as it was his second day back in the nursery. He snuggled next to his mother.

"Yes little one. Home," she mewed sleepily. Circling around her nest a few times, she finally collapsed on the soft moss. An apprentice must have put the soft feathers in the nest and. She was asleep.

"Bluestripe! Bluestripe wake up!" Cherrykit's mew woke Bluestripe out of a fitful sleep. For a moment, she wondered why she couldn't smell Buttonweasel's reek. Then she remembered the two queens had moved back to the spacious nursery now that it had been rebuilt.

"What is it, Cherrykit?" Bluestripe murmured. The ginger kit's belly rumbled.

"Well, you were still sleeping when we woke up, and Redflame told us to let you sleep. So we did, 'cept we couldn't eat 'cause you were sleeping," she replied mournfully.

"And we're real hungry," Swallowkit added. Bluestripe started purring.

"Okay, dears. Would you like to try some fresh-kill?"

"We want milk!" the three kits mewed in unison, causing Bluestripe to sigh. She lay on her side and swept the kits to her belly to suckle, their little kneading paws coaxing out all the warm milk they could. Bluestripe looked across the nursery to where Sunstorm was. She had awoken and was feeding her kits.

"Bluestripe?" she called, seeing the blue queen looking at her. "I - I don't think that they are getting enough milk." Looking at the kits, Bluestripe saw them kneading and mewling.

"I'll get Emberfur and she can give you borage leaves." Bluestripe suggested.

"She already gave me some, right before you woke up." Sunstorm looked at her kits, then at Bluestripe. "Could you feed Alderkit? I don't know if he will survive without more milk." Bluestripe nodded gently. Just then Falconwing pushed through the bramble entrance. Bluestripe saw Sunstorm look down, uncomfortable.

"Falconwing, I have something to tell you," Sunstorm mewed urgently as her mate entered through the bramble tunnel.

"It's okay, Sunstorm. I heard you talking, it's okay. If Bluestripe must nurse Alderkit for him to survive, so be it. As long as," he bent to lick his mates head, "as long as... he survives." Ever so carefully, he pulled Alderkit from Sunstorm and brought the bundle to Bluestripe. Setting him down, he nudged him in with Bluestripe's kits. Immediately smelling milk, Alderkit pushed between Drizzlekit and Cherrykit, and started suckling hungrily. Falconwing turned and curled around his mate and other kits, watching Alderkit nurse. Sunstorm sighed gratefully to Bluestripe.

Sundown approached, the shadows lengthening quickly. A cool breeze shook the trees, carrying a strange scent through the camp.

"What is that horrible smell, Bluestripe?" Swallowkit exclaimed, coming back to the nursery. Bluestripe poked her head out of the brambles and breathed in the wind. Instantly, her hackles rose. Calling for her kits to stay in the nursery, she charged toward Redflame.

"ShadowClan! Redflame, the wind reeks of them," she mewed quickly. He licked her head and slipped into Stormstar's den. *RiverClan, now ShadowClan, so soon?* Bluestripe gazed after him, then padded back to the nursery. The air crashed down on the camp, the terrible reek making tension rise. Stormstar suddenly leaped to Highrock and yowled something that was inaudible over the wind. The powerful stench was adding a pressure over the camp, causing a deathly silence. Bluestripe curled around her kits and watched Sunstorm bristle protectively around hers. Everything seemed to be in slow motion. ShadowClan scent was in the camp, and Bluestripe saw them leap at the brave warriors. Stormstar in the lead, right as a thread of lightning split the sky, and rain started pouring into the camp.

"Warriors!" Redflame yowled. Every warrior turned toward the bramble tunnel, ears pricked. A flood of cats appeared at the tunnel and at the front, Timberstar.

"Why are you here?" Stormstar hissed, his dark fur rippling in the tearing wind.

"Twolegs are invading our part of the forest," Timberstar meowed. "We've come to discuss where you want to put the new scent markers, past your borders."

"We hardly have enough prey as it is," Strongheart murmured.

"Territory!" Duskfeather spat. "He can't possibly think that we'd-"

"I will fight if necessary," Redflame growled. "On your word, Stormstar."

Stormstar held his head high. "Wait." He flicked his tail.

"Do you want us to feed our elders and kits carrion and crowfood?" a sleek tortoiseshell mewed. Through the torrents, Bluestripe saw that it was Stillpaw - the apprentice she had fought moons ago as an apprentice herself - but as a warrior.

"Quiet, Ferntail," Nightfoot, the ShadowClan deputy, hissed. "This is our business, not yours."

"This is frog-brained!" the warrior retorted. Bluestripe was surprised by her courage. "This is not your business either, Nightfoot. It's Timberstar's and ShadowClan's."

Stormstar's hackles rose. Sunstorm hissed behind Bluestripe and curled around her three tiny kits - Alderkit had been returned to her own nest. Frostkit let out a tiny mewl and the queen began to lick her softly.

"*Attack*!"

Stormstar yowled the alarm first. Through the gloom Bluestripe picked out her brother, Fogcloud, instantly running to Tinyblossom's and Moonwhisper's sides. Fire shone in his eyes that was visible from across the clearing.

Sunstorm's kits looked just like Redflame's brother's, Falconwing. Eaglekit let out his first word.

"Scared."

* * *

Fogcloud leaped toward Nightfoot, growling with his claws unsheathed. The deputy let out a yowl and raked his face as rain poured down, choking him with ShadowClan scent. Tinyblossom ran to his defense and bowled over the tabby she-cat, spitting with rage.

Swiftclaw was wrestling with a large warrior named Runningspirit, while Strongheart clawed at Quietclaw. All around them they heard yowling and screeching, and one of the warriors seemed to be inching its way to the nursery.

"I don't trust that cat," Sunstorm hissed. "I don't trust her at all."

"Go through the dirtplace tunnel!" Bluestripe whispered urgently as she slipped into the nursery again. "We can find a safe spot for our kits in the forest!"

Sunstorm handed Frostkit to her sister to carry and carefully picked up the scruffs of Eaglekit and Alderkit in her jaws. Bluestripe's kits

stopped at the nursery entrance looking out curiously, not sure what was going on.

At last they made their way out of camp. Careful to turn her head so she could see, Bluestripe dashed into a bush and beckoned for the others to follow. Sunstorm settled next to her, tucking her kits inside.

The suspicious-looking cat had slipped into the nursery, with two others. As they slipped out, Timberstar noticed that the warriors were doing everything as planned. A fourth and fifth warrior were running toward the medicine den.

"Those fox-hearted kittypets!" Laceleaf screeched, rushing to Emberfur's and Darkspot's aid. "Attacking kits and medicine cats is against the warrior code!"

"Check if Sunstorm or Bluestripe are inside!" Redflame meowed, unable to hide the worry in his voice. Weaselnose nodded and dashed over, but it was impossible to see through the groups of angry, fighting cats.

Bluestripe looked around wildly for her kits, noticing that they weren't there. Looking toward the battle, she saw three ShadowClan warrior slipping out of camp, with bundles in their jaws. Her kits were gone.

Swiftclaw immediately leaped at the ShadowClan deputy, Nightfoot, and started blugeoning her with vicious blows. Nightfoot looked at the aged she-cat with hatred. Suddenly, she lunged at Swiftclaw, who didn't pull back in time. Nightfoot bit Swiftclaw in the leg, then started clawing her belly. Blood gushed out as Nightfoot carved a deep gash into it. With her last ounce of strength, Swiftclaw lunged out at Nightfoot's face, slashing across her eyes, and down to her throat. Stormstar saw in slow motion as his mate hit the ground, not breathing before being pulled into the swing of battle again.

"*Swiftclaw*!" Stormstar choked, pushing through the fray toward his dying mate. "No!"

"Mother! No!" Tinyblossom yowled with grief. Falconwing pricked up his ears, following. "This can't be happening!"

"Nightfoot!" a ShadowClan warrior named Sagebrook cried. "Nightfoot! She's hurt!"

A few worried ShadowClan cats broke away from the fight to see what had happened to their deputy while Fogcloud and Redflame fought a swift cat named Lightpool. They weaved in between each other, trying to pin her down, when at last Falconwing aimed a threatening bite at her. Lightpool moved the last moment and he struck her neck.

"Lightpool!" Ferntail yowled in horror, rushing over to the hurt she-cat. "She was my mother!"

Falconwing was horrified - he hadn't meant to hurt her badly - but the she-cat was trying to pin him down. He leaped, trying to dig his claws into the tortoiseshell flank. Blood poured from a wound in his shoulder.

Redflame was fighting one cat after another. A brown tom with dark black eyes leaped in his face. Redflame knocked the dark tom over, and started raking his belly fur. With one mighty heave the ShadowClan cat, Snakestrike, pushed Redflame off of him, and lunged for his front legs. Redflame felt his legs collapse from under him, and his jaw slam onto the ground. Before he could get up, Snakestrike lunged for his throat. Redflame tried to get the tom to let go, but couldn't breathe. Soon, he collapsed, everything going black in front of him.

Falconwing looked over the she-cat he was fighting and saw his brother get bowled over by a ShadowClan warrior three times Redflame's size. Eyes wide in panic, he yowled.

"Redflame! No!" Finding new strength, Falconwing bowled Ferntail off of him and pelted toward his brother's body. He was still alive, but unable to move. Suddenly, from behind him, a heavy-set tom bowled him over. It was Ghostwhisker. Another ShadowClan warrior was locked already in a deadly combat with Moonwhisper. Falconwing turned, and saw to his surprise, Bluestripe running

around the battle, toward the camp entrance, then stop and turn back, tail down. Ghostwhisker suddenly yowled and leaped onto Falconwing. Shaking the other tom off, he started landing fast, short blows, one after another onto Ghostwhisker's muzzle. Suddenly lunging forward, he nipped Ghostwhisker's leg, and sent the tom screeching out of the camp. Turning, he saw Moonwhisper, bloody and tired, staring at where Redflame's body had been. It was gone. A heart-broken yowl filled the air. Timberstar flicked his tail.

"We are done here for now, Stormstar. But you will find that you will need to give your territory away before I'm done with you." Turning, he left the camp, his warriors behind him.

"I will send two of my warriors to help you carry your dead warrior," Stormstar replied calmly. "Grasspelt, Weaselnose, please..."

"They've taken my kits. They took my mate. They took everything I ever had!" Bluestripe's soft, panicked voice could just be heard over the noise of the camp repairing from the battle. "They took them."

Chapter 31

It was not long after the battle until ThunderClan noticed that their deputy had disappeared. Darkspot was tending to wounds while Emberfur made poultices. Sunstorm had refused to take her kits out; she did not want them to see the dark side of Clan life until they were older. Blood seeped into the grass.

Swiftclaw's vigil was held that night. It seemed so wrong that Redflame could not be there for his mother's vigil.

"My kits!" Bluestripe wailed. "And Redflame! They're all gone!"

"What do you mean?" Stormstar asked her. But it was clear that they were indeed gone as he glanced around. "They couldn't have just... *taken* them!"

"Redflame was badly injured and my kits are too young to resist a warrior carrying them," Bluestripe breathed heavily, grief gripping her. "We must get him."

"We will, Bluestripe." Weaselnose touched his tail to her in a friendly fashion. "But we're not battle-fit at the moment. As soon as ThunderClan is strong enough, we will get them back."

"I need them *now*," Bluestripe murmured. How long would she have to wait? Falconwing had rushed into the nursery to check on Sunstorm and it was unlikely he knew yet. Tinyblossom said nothing - she was Redflame's sister and she hung her head low while Fogcloud brushed against her pelt.

Beecloud let out a growl. "What is the use of capturing a Clan deputy?" he mewed. "To hold them hostage?"

"A Clan is not as stable without a deputy," Stormstar replied calmly. "If I were to die, who would go to the moonstone?"

No one said anything; they were afraid now.

"It's only fitting that we pick a stand-in deputy," Stormstar meowed a bit louder. "Beecloud will replace Redflame while he is gone."

Beecloud's eyes grew wide. "*Me,* Stormstar?" he mewed disbelievingly.

"I believe that you are a warrior loyal to his Clan and clever enough to lead," Stormstar nodded. "And yes, Bluestripe - we will attack ShadowClan once everyone's wounds are healed. We cannot last long without our true deputy gone."

"And my kits," Bluestripe wailed.

"Remember, they are with their father." Stormstar pressed his nose into her comfortingly. "No honorable Clan would do kits any harm."

The blood had soaked into the ground at last, and Sunstorm brought her kits out of the nursery. Watery starlight soaked each pelt. Tinyblossom went over to Falconwing and whispered something in her brother's ear; Falconwing flattened his ears.

"He's not dead," Sunstorm whispered comfortingly.

"I know. That's what worries me," Falconwing growled. "Why do they have him there? I'd feel better if he was with StarClan now, safe and surrounded by cats who love him."

Beecloud and Stormstar were muttering together; Redflame was Stormstar's son, and one of Beecloud's best friends. The whole Clan seemed restless, afraid that their friend or relative was being held hostage by an enemy Clan.

"Stormstar," Strongheart meowed heavily, "I've made my decision."

"What decision?" Stormstar asked him, looking at him intently.

"I want to go join the elders' den," he replied.

Stormstar dipped his head. "I understand," he mewed. Dismissing himself to Beecloud, he leaped onto the Highrock and yowled the summons. Every major event in Clan life called for a ceremony, and it was time for Strongheart's.

"Oakleaf, would you like to join your brother in the elders' den?" Stormstar asked him politely.

"Don't be mouse-brained," the tom growled. "I may be old, but I have a lot in me. I'm not ready to stop yet." he muttered almost to himself, like he were trying to convince himself too.

"Of course." Stormstar nodded, and Strongheart just looked understanding. "Strongheart, is it your wish to give up the name of a warrior and go to join the elders?"

"It is," meowed Strongheart, in way that sounded both relieved and painful.

"Your Clan honors you and all the service you have given to us. I call upon them to give you many moons of rest," Stormstar told him.

"Strongheart! Strongheart!" the Clan cheered. Strongheart dipped his head and suddenly it was clear that he was aging. His muzzle was turning grey and his ears looked less sharp. Buttonweasel, Windpelt, and Littlestripe yowled loudest, welcoming their new denmate.

"I wanna go outside," Eaglekit mewed. "Pwease?"

"Alderkit's still asleep," Sunstorm told him gently. The little tom was getting stronger at last and she did not want to disturb him. It was only a few sunrises after the battle and her kits were beginning to talk.

"But I wanna," he grumbled.

He should she playing with the other kits, Sunstorm thought with a deep pang of sorrow. *Bluestripe's kits...*

Frostkit stirred, lifting her tiny white head. Sunstorm licked her daughter's fur.

"Where's Falconwing?" she asked suddenly.

"He's with Tinyblossom, little one," the red-furred queen crooned.

"I want him." Frostkit snuggled closer into Sunstorm's body.

"He'll come. Don't worry." Sunstorm knew he would want to talk to his sister when their brother was gone. Fogcloud had been with his mate as well, unable to leave her side after Redflame had been taken. Bluestripe had been sleeping in the warriors' den while there was no reason for her to be in the nursery, using Willowtuft and Redflame's littermates as her comfort.

But it was then when Falconwing emerged through the nursery entrance. He had a deep but healing wound on his shoulder and his ear was torn. Pushing his way toward his mate's nest, he licked Eaglekit's and Frostkit's heads.

"Good morning, my loves," he meowed. He pushed his nose into Sunstorm's cheek. "Stormstar announced that we'll attack ShadowClan at dawn."

"What!" Sunstorm gasped, taken aback. "Your wound's barely healed! We have to wait!"

"What else are we supposed to do?" Falconwing flattened his ears, trying to make her understand. "Our deputy has been taken hostage. My brother and his kits. Surely you feel the same for me? Or at least for Bluestripe?" There was no envy in his eyes, only pain.

Sunstorm paused but at last dipped her head. "I understand," she meowed. "I'm worried for you. And our kits."

Alderkit stretched, blinking his tiny amber eyes like his mother's. His and Eaglekit's eyes were just like Sunstorm's except for Frostkit's, which were a perfect copy of her father's golden ones. Falconwing stared at them all, blinking silently. Then he sat down and wrapped his tail around his paws. "I know. I am too - not for me, but for the kits. And for Redflame and his. Redflame's kits are my kin."

"And mine," Sunstorm reminded him. "I'd fight if I didn't have to stay with them. Tinyblossom will be there."

"That reminds me," he mentioned. "I have to go lead a patrol today.

Beecloud just organized them." Giving each cat a lick between the ears, he padded out of the nursery.

"Can we go outside *now*?" Eaglekit whined, stretching out his little paws.

"Oh, I suppose," Sunstorm mewed. She suddenly remembered that Drizzlekit was Moonwhisper's son and she felt a pang of sorrow for her sister.

It was quite peaceful, at least, and the elders were stretched out in the sun. Tinyblossom was sharing tongues with Fogcloud, tails entwined, and Emberfur was dressing Oakleaf's wound. Oakleaf was getting older too. Swiftclaw and Stormstar were talking intently. Sunstorm felt out-of-place as she trotted over to Moonwhisper.

"Hi," she mewed sheepishly. Her kits looked at their kin with huge round eyes.

"Your kits are wonderful," Moonwhisper purred. Her ice-blue eyes blinked.

Yours too, Sunstorm thought weakly, but she just nodded. "Thank you," she replied.

Suddenly, Fogcloud burst into the conversation, ears pricked and alert. "You won't believe it!" he purred so loudly it was hard to tell what he was saying. "Tinyblossom's going to have my kits!"

"Congratulations!" Sunstorm and Moonwhisper brushed up against him. "I knew it had to happen sometime."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Fogcloud asked indignantly.

Moonwhisper shook her head mysteriously. "You two are very close," she meowed. "You'll make great parents."

"Thank you." Fogcloud gave them both a swift lick. "I'm going to pass the news to Bluestripe and our parents."

"Fogcloud's going to have kits!" Alderkit squeaked. "More denmates!"

"Where are Bluestripe's kits, Sunstorm?" Frostkit piped up, her bright gold eyes staring up at her mother.

Sunstorm swallowed. What was she supposed to tell them? "They went to another place for awhile. They're coming back tomorrow."

"Okay," Frostkit nodded. "Come on, Eaglekit, Alderkit! Let's pretend we're enemy warriors!"

Moonwhisper let out a *mrow* of laughter. "It's lucky that they didn't ask anything else," she added more darkly. "Like where Redflame went."

* * *

Stormstar padded through the bracken past Fourtrees, drinking in the air. Warriors followed behind him. Acornpaw, Flintpaw and Patchpaw, still scarred, padded along together while Tulippaw and Irispaw followed. Going deeper into in the pines, the smell of ShadowClan became more evident; they were getting closer. There was a narrow path leading into a clearing up ahead.

"Follow me," Stormstar ordered.

As the ShadowClan cats had done, the ThunderClan cats lined up so their enemies could see them. Kits squealed and ran into the nursery and Timberstar's eyes widened.

"What's this about?" he hissed.

"We've come to get our deputy and his kits!" Stormstar hissed back. "Where is he?"

Timberstar narrowed his eyes. "He's being guarded in the warriors' den," he meowed. "His kits are being watched in the nursery by one of our queens."

"Hand them over or I will order my warriors to attack," Stormstar growled. Fogcloud lifted his head above the other cats, trying to see.

"Very well."

"Where's your deputy?" Stormstar asked him, bristling.

"Nightfoot was blinded by one of your warriors," Timberstar answered delicately. "Ferntail is our deputy now."

Stormstar hissed, "Attack!" and each cat flung himself further into the clearing. Instantly a mass of ginger fur collided with him, bowling him over. Spitting and hissing, Fogcloud tossed him off. He realized that the cat was smaller than a warrior and must have been an apprentice, but he was very large for his age and muscular and he was excellently powerful.

"ThunderClan flea-pelt!" the apprentice hissed, digging his claws into Fogcloud's flank. The warrior actually had to writhe out of the younger cat's grip and attempt to pin him down. Spinning in the air, Fogcloud tried to rake the apprentice's belly, heart pounding. But the apprentice anticipated his move and dodged out of the way.

He's fast! Fogcloud thought, panting. *He can't possibly be an apprentice!*

The apprentice made a zig-zag motion, confusing him. Then he leaped onto Fogcloud's back, latching on with sharp claws. Yowling, Fogcloud bit what he could reach of the ginger cat's paw. With huge effort, he bowled the younger cat off, both shoulders bleeding.

The warriors that had been guarding Redflame had joined in the fight; Fogcloud noticed that the deputy was inching toward the nursery. Willing him to get his kits so they could escape, Fogcloud threw himself onto a cat named Twilightshade, hissing and tumbling in the dust.

Out of the corner of his eye Fogcloud saw the ginger apprentice leap at Oakleaf. Although he was a fierce fighter, it was clear that through the fray of battle his strength was faltering. Fogcloud tried to throw Twilightshade off so he could go to help him, but the ShadowClan she-cat was holding him down, her jaws snapping.

"Oakleaf!" he choked, hoping one of his Clan would hear and go to the senior warrior's aid. But everyone was too locked in battle; that was until he spotted Tulippaw leaping toward the older warrior.

Fogcloud rolled out from under the dark-pelted warrior, claws unsheathed and spitting with rage. Oakleaf was slowing down as the apprentice bowled him over, raking his belly. Blood poured and soaked into the ground. The warrior let out a yowl; this cat was showing no mercy. That was against the warrior code!

The apprentice was trying to pin him down - despite the blood running everywhere, Oakleaf was trying to avoid him.

"Get away from him!" Tulippaw spat. The near-warrior scraped at his throat, but the ShadowClan cat aimed a well-timed blow at her belly. The ThunderClan apprentice collapsed to the ground.

Oakleaf managed to drag himself away, hardly able to walk.

"You will give us territory or Redflame dies too!" Timberstar commanded. "Twolegs have invaded our territory and there is nowhere to hunt!"

"Your apprentice knows nothing of the warrior code!" Fogcloud retorted, finding his strength and hoisting himself to his paws. "He nearly killed him in cold blood!"

"I did nothing of the sort!" the ginger tabby bristled.

"That doesn't matter." Timberstar glared at Stormstar. "Your battle here is done. We won. Now take your dead *elder* and get of my territory." He slashed a paw threateningly at Stormstar.

"ThunderClan, back to our territory," Stormstar mewed painfully. Oakleaf was nearly dead, so he helped him to his paws, half carrying him back to camp.

Redflame and his kits did not return.

Bluestripe would not leave the nursery. She insisted on suckling Alderkit for seemingly all day. Sunstorm did not ask her to give him up so he could play with his siblings; she knew she must be suffering intensely. Alderkit seemed happy, and Sunstorm noted that he was growing strong with the extra nutrition.

"Bluestripe," he mewled, "I wanna go see Buttonweasel."

"No, little one," Bluestripe replied. "You must stay with me."

Darkspot pushed through the entrance to the nursery with a mouthful of leaves. Bluestripe let out a hiss.

"Who is that?" she hissed.

"It's only Darkspot," Sunstorm answered, bewildered. The medicine cat said nothing as he padded inside.

"Borage leaves," he meowed gently. "So you can produce more milk."

"I don't need that," Bluestripe growled, pushing Alderkit closer to her and licking him. "Give some to Sunstorm."

Darkspot let out a long, drawn-out sigh. "Alright," he answered. "Eat these, Sunstorm."

"Thank you." Sunstorm chewed the leaves, swallowing heavily. What was happening to her sister?

But soon the young medicine cat was back with a piece of fresh-kill dangling from his mouth. "Here," he offered. "Patchpaw just caught it."

"Thanks," Bluestripe grunted, taking a bite. As Darkspot left, Sunstorm began to see Bluestripe's eyelids begin to droop as she licked her lips. Resting her head on her paws, she began to sleep. Alderkit squirmed out from the nest, cuddling with his mother, Sunstorm.

Chapter 32

Moonwhisper padded over to Fogcloud, who was sharing tongues with his mate, Tinyblossom. "Hey," she meowed softly. She glanced at Tinyblossom's belly. It wasn't swollen yet, but Moonwhisper knew in a few moons its would be.

Fogcloud looked up at her. "Oh, hi!" he mewed cheerfully. "Can you just believe it? I'm going to be a father! Have kits of my own! Wow!" Moonwhisper purred. She remembered when she was pregnant with Drizzlekit. It was the greatest and yet the worst thing that had ever happened to her. She shook her head to clear it.

"Yea. You'll be a great father, Fogcloud. And you'll have the most beautiful kits ever," Moonwhisper purred. Fogcloud got to his paws, shooting Tinyblossom an apologetic glance.

"I'll be right back," he murmured.

"Okay," Tinyblossom replied.

"What is it?" Moonwhisper asked when Tinyblossom had gotten up and padded to the nursery.

"Well," Fogcloud began, "all this talk about kits... Will you and Beecloud ever have kits of your own?"

Moonwhisper stepped back, somewhat shocked. "I-I don't know," she murmured. "I never thought about that... Beecloud and I are still-" She stopped herself. She couldn't remember if Fogcloud knew about her and Beecloud's fight and Drizzlekit being her son. "I don't know," she repeated.

Fogcloud purred. "You two would make a great couple."

Moonwhisper dropped her gaze. She had thought so before she met Ravenfrost. She knew she and Beecloud would have been mates if Ravenfrost had never come into her life. But he had, and *they* had

become mates. "I have to go," she murmured, hurrying away to the warriors' den. She curled into her nest and closed her eyes.

"Moonwhisper?"

Her eyes flew open. "What?" she grunted. She just wanted to be left alone.

"Are you okay?" Beecloud whispered. Moonwhisper sighed.

"I miss Drizzlekit," she suddenly realized. "I hope he's okay, along with Redflame and Bluestripe's kits..."

Beecloud sat down beside her in her nest. He licked her head comfortingly. "I'm sure they're fine." Moonwhisper nodded hopefully.

"You're a good friend, Beecloud."

"I-I had always hoped we'd be more than that," he stuttered, looking away in embarrassment.

Moonwhisper paused. She let her heart flow out to him and closed her eyes once more. "Me too," Moonwhisper purred, rubbing her muzzle against his, and whispered. "Me too."

The next few days were a blur. Redflame and the kits were still gone; Stormstar had announced they would wait a little while until all the cats were battle-fit again before rescuing them. Moonwhisper spent these days in and out restless sleep in the medicine den; one moment she was burning with fever, the next she was shivering with cold. Beecloud often stayed with her to keep her company, lying next to her when she was cold, or fetching soaked moss when her fever was taking over.

"Help!" some cat screeched in the distance. Moonwhisper raced over the dark field, coughing as her throat tightened.

"I'm coming!" she croaked. "Who is that?"

The screeching stopped. Moonwhisper whipped around as the bushes rustled beside her. A grey and white mottled tom stepped

out of the bushes before her. His ice-blue eyes blazed with hurt.

"Already?" he whispered. "Have you already replaced me? So soon?"

Moonwhisper stepped back. "Wh-what do you mean?" she murmured. "I haven't replaced anyone, I-"

Ravenfrost's lips drew back in a snarl. He glared at her before racing across the field into the starry night sky.

Moonwhisper woke with a start. She inhaled deeply to calm herself. Beecloud lifted his head beside her.

"You okay?" he murmured. She nodded.

"I just need some fresh air."

Beecloud blinked at her. "Okay."

Moonwhisper rose from the nest in the medicine den and stepped outside. A cool breeze washed over her face, and she sat down in the soft grass gazing at Silverpelt. She felt... *peaceful*, despite her unsettling dream. And she suddenly realized her fever was gone, replaced by a sharp, almost unbearable pain in her stomach. She bit back a yowl, crawling back to the medicine den. "Darkspot!" she yelped.

The young medicine cat lifted his head from his nest. He immediately rushed over to Moonwhisper.

"Lay on your side," he instructed. Moonwhisper obeyed, wincing at the throb in his stomach, knowing what was coming this time.

"Is she okay?" Emberfur called from the back of the den. Darkspot paused.

"I think so," he replied. "Come here, though." Emberfur nodded and padded over.

"Give her a poppy seed for the pain, Darkspot," she demanded. He raced to the back of the den, grabbed a poppy seed, and set it in front of Moonwhisper.

"Eat," he murmured.

Moonwhisper lapped up the seed gratefully, moaning. Beecloud got up from the nest they were sharing and sat beside the silver tabby, worry glistening in his dark yellow eyes.

"Will she be okay?" he whispered.

Darkspot nodded. "She's been through this before, Beecloud," he murmured, shooting him a knowing look. Beecloud's eyes widened in shock.

"K-Kits?" he mouthed. Emberfur and Darkspot nodded in sync. His yellow eyes glowed.

Moonwhisper felt dizzy. Her head was spinning, and she closed her eyes, welcoming sleep. She could feel Beecloud curling around her while darkness closed in.

The next morning was easier. The pain had gone, but Moonwhisper could feel her stomach becoming heavier. She sighed, trying not to overwhelm herself with worried thoughts. *I've done this before,* she told herself. *I can do this*. Could she? She shook her head.

"Everything okay?" Beecloud meowed, padding up beside her. She shrugged.

"I don't know," she admitted, turning towards him. "I-I never thought I would have kits again in my life..."

Beecloud purred. "I know your life has been hectic. You and Ravenfrost have... have finally gone your separate ways," he lowered his voice, "and you had Drizzlekit. But that's the past. It's okay to be scared for the future. I am, too. But it's exciting!" His eyes glowed. "I'll finally have my own kits..."

Moonwhisper licked his ear affectionately. "I'm sorry for everything, Beecloud. These kits I am carrying right now should have been the only kits I have ever carried. But that's not how it worked out. Drizzlekit *had* been born... I can't say he shouldn't have, though, I-"

"Moonwhisper." Beecloud stared at her. "What's done is done. You

can't change the past, and I would never want you to think that things shouldn't have happened. But they did, and there's nothing you can do about it. Only look ahead. Not back, but forward."

Tears glistened in Moonwhisper's eyes. She buried her nose in Beecloud's tabby pelt, shuddering. "How could I ever make it up to you?" she sobbed.

Beecloud purred, licking her ears comfortingly. "You don't have to. I forgave you awhile ago. I know you didn't mean to hurt me..."

"I always loved you, Beecloud. I just didn't know it before."

"I know." Beecloud sat down in the grass outside of the medicine cat's' den. Moonwhisper sat down beside him, leaning into his shoulder. "And I always loved you, Moonwhisper. From the day you were born."

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting!" Stormstar's summons rippled over the camp, and soon all warriors, apprentices, elders and queens sat before the Highrock. Moonwhisper chose a spot next to Becloud.

"It is time," Stormstar began, "to take back our Clanmates! They have been held hostage by ShadowClan for too long now! And they deserve to come back home!"

"About time!" Bluestripe muttered next to Moonwhisper. The silver queen could see sadness in her sister's eyes, and she felt a pang of sorrow for her loss. She couldn't help but think of Drizzlekit as well.

"We will attack when the moon rises!" Stormstar announced. Cheers of agreement flooded through the crowd. "And we will take back our deputy and his kits!"

My kit, too, Moonwhisper added silently. "This Clan meeting is over," Stormstar went on, "and you all may now return to what you were doing before."

Moonwhisper padded back to the nursery. She had made herself a nest there the day earlier, and now every cat knew she was expecting Beecloud's kits. Her heart twisted with joy.

"They'll be wonderful." Beecloud pushed through the entrance to the nursery. He hadn't left Moonwhisper's side since they found out about the kits.

"Yes," Moonwhisper purred. "They will be."

Chapter 33

Eaglekit pounced on Falconwing's tail, wriggling his haunches as he launched himself. Sunstorm let out a *mrow* of laughter. She could tell that her son was going to be a mighty hunter like his father.

"I got it!" he squealed. "Look, Father and Mother! Look! I-"

Falconwing shifted his tail and the tiny tom fell on his nose.

Frostkit doubled over in laughter, falling off all four paws. "Maybe next time, Eaglekit!" she purred.

"Now, now," Sunstorm mewed softly, "he was off to a good start. There's no need to make fun of him."

"*See*?" Eaglekit pouted, screwing up his face and making his tail stand straight up. "Let's see you do better!"

Sunstorm's gaze drifted toward the sky; sunset was coming swiftly. She felt a tingling in her paws. She only ever felt that when she had kits.

Falconwing sensed her worry and twined his tail around hers. "I don't like seeing you so nervous," he admitted a bit awkwardly.

Sunstorm pressed her cheek against his. "I love you," she whispered.

"I love you, too." Falconwing shifted his paws, fixing his gaze on his kits.

"Eeeeulgh!" Alderkit mewed. "Gross!"

The red queen let out a soft *mrow* of laughter, giving her son a swift lick. Falconwing curled his tail around Sunstorm's.

Darkspot padded up to them eyes huge and sad. "Hi," he mewed. "Did you hear?"

"Hear what?" Sunstorm's ears pricked.

"It's Oakleaf," he explained heavily. "He just died."

Falconwing flattened his ears. "Oh no," he meowed. "I'm so sorry... How did it happen?"

"I don't really know for sure. He's getting old, Falconwing. His body must have just given up after all his battle wounds. But he'll be with Maplestar."

Fogcloud, who had been sitting nearby, pricked up his ears but said nothing. Then he shifted his gaze. "It was an apprentice," he meowed. "I don't know his name. But he's a fierce fighter."

"An *apprentice* killed Oakleaf?" Sunstorm gaped disbelievingly.

"What is it, Emberfur?" Sunstorm asked the medicine cat. The old tortoiseshell was rummaging for something.

"It's Littlestripe," she told her heavily. "I went to check on him. He died in his sleep."

Sunstorm hung her head. "StarClan be with him," she meowed softly.

"Windpelt was his best friend, you know," Emberfur went on. "She hasn't taken it very well. I have to go prepare Littlestripe's body for vigil." She took a clump of rosemary in her teeth and headed toward the elders' den.

"Littlestripe? He's dead?" Frostkit squeaked. "Wasn't he Buttonweasel's friend?"

"More or less, yes," Sunstorm felt better with her daughter's voice in her ears.

"Oh no!" Alderkit let out a wail. "Not Littlestripe!"

Windpelt sat looking up at Silverpelt only a few fox-lengths away. Sunstorm padded up to her; the elder let out a throaty cough and looked at the warrior with large, sad eyes.

"I'd ask Emberfur about that cough," Sunstorm advised her gently.

"It's nothing. I haven't drunk anything since sundown." Windpelt licked her chest and headed toward a small pool next to the medicine cat den.

"There's something important we need to do," Stormstar interjected, leaping onto the Highrock. "We have some special apprentices that are ready to become warriors. They fought just like worthy warriors in the battle."

Irispaw and Tulippaw jumped up in delight. It was time!

"I, Stormstar, leader of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have trained hard to learn to ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn.

"Irispaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and protect your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do."

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Irispaw, from this moment you will be known as Irisdrop. StarClan honors your persistence and and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan.

"Tulippaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and protect your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," Tulippaw declared.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Tulippaw, from this moment you will be known as Tuliprose. StarClan honors your courage and and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

* * *

"Everyone!" Beaverpelt pushed through the bramble tunnel, pelt bristling. "Badger! Near the sandy hollow! Emberfur's been killed!"

Chapter 34

"Flintpaw, Patchpaw, Beecloud, Oaklea-," Stormstar stopped as he realized what he had said. "I mean, Weaselnose, Tinyblossom, Beaverpelt, and-" a old cracked voice sounded from across the camp.

"Stormstar, I'm going too. I've locked away in there an' I'm gonna fight." Buttonweasel croaked his message out.

"Very well, Buttonweasel. I will respect your decision. Stormfoot, Falconwing, Sandfur, Scartooth, Duskfeather, Acornpaw, and Fogcloud, wait awhile, then follow our scent trail to the battle. We might need you for reinforcement. The rest of you, guard the camp," Stormstar grunted the orders. Looking at his patrol, flicked his tail. Heading out of the camp, the other warriors milled around aimlessly.

"I scented it over -" Beaverpelt made his way past the sandy training hollow. After awhile he finally stopped, and indeed, a badger set had been dug into the soft forest floor.

"Warriors, form a large half circle around the entrance. Not too close. Then start yowling and making noises to draw its attention." Stormstar watched Buttonweasel carefully, as the elder moved his creaky old joints. *Why had he wanted to come?* The warriors assembled themselves, Buttonweasel standing at the entrance. Stormstar flicked his tail.

"Come on out, you cranky ol' badger!"

"Get your stinky breath out-"

"Come out or I'll kill you-"

"No use staying here, it's-" The patrol started yowling toward the entrance to the set. A rumbling shaking noise shook the ground. A huge badger lumbered slowly out, looking at the warriors with

small beady eyes. Letting out an indignant grunt, the badger lunged toward the ring of cats. Stormstar looked at the thick fur, seeing many long ugly scars. He motioned the others to attack. A swarm of cats suddenly attacked the badger, who lashed out at the cat in front of it. Stormstar watched the fight from the corner of his eye as he nipped and leapt away and, before he knew it, the badger was nearly on top of Buttonweasel, who was slashing viciously at the two little black eyes. It roared in pain as Buttonweasel lashed out at its face, scoring its mark, while he yowled,

"It is time to re-live the wondrous days of Buttonweasel the Great and Powerful!" lunging out one more time, Buttonweasel slashed out one of its eyes. The other warriors cheered - but were silenced as the badger batted the fighting elder out of the air with its massive forepaw. A sickening crunch could be heard over the deafening sound of the struggle.

"Buttonweasel! No!" Patchpaw squealed, and launched herself at the badger, clawing its ugly face. But it was too late. The badger picked up the dead elder in its bloody jaws, and started lumbering back to its set, but not before the second patrol arrived.

They fought till nearly sundown, many of the cats taking serious injuries. Finally, just as the sun was sinking into the horizon, the badger gave up and left.

"Patchpaw, Flintpaw, go into the set and see if-" Stormstar's eyes filled with pain, "if you can find Emberfur's body." The two apprentices nodded and slipped into the set. Stormstar waited patiently. Suddenly, a head popped out. Then, Flintpaw pulled out a bloody, mangled body. Patchpaw appeared after him.

"Let's go," Stormstar whispered. He turned and led the cats back to camp.

Darkspot treated wound after wound, and finally, at nearly sunup the next morning, got to prepare Emberfur and Buttonweasel's bodies. That night, their vigils were held.

Two sunrises later, Bluestripe was awoken from a strange scent in camp. Slipping out of the nursery, she saw Timberstar, and two

other ShadowClan cats in the camp. She recognized Ferntail, and Brokenleaf, their medicine cat.

"We are only asking for a little. Please, Stormstar, our cats are *dying*. Just a little bit of territory." Bluestripe heard Brokenleaf plead. She saw Stormstar consider.

"Fine. Too much blood has been shed this leaf-bare. We will let you have Snakerocks until greenleaf. Then, we will put our normal scent markers. We *will* take it back with force if necessary."

Timberstar sighed.

"Fine. I never thought I would admit I needed help. But here I am. I will take Snakerocks, until greenleaf." Timberstar finally agreed.

"Our deputy, and kits," Stormstar inquired.

"They shall be returned." Timberstar informed him. Stormstar nodded.

"Thank you, Stormstar." Brokenleaf mewed. They turned and left the camp. Bluestripe paced back and forth. It was nearly time for her kits to be apprenticed. They had been gone for over a moon. Suddenly, the bracken tunnel shook, and the four cats padded into the camp. Bluestripe charged toward her mate and kits, smothering them with furious, loving licks. She turned to Redflame, and started licking his head and ears. He pushed forward, stumbling in front of the kits. Darkspot ran out of his den, and helped the warrior to a soft nest. Bluestripe led her kits to the nursery, where she had fluffed up the nest the minute she heard they were coming back. Seeing the nest, they collapsed, and fell into a deep, deep sleep, with Bluestripe curled protectively around them.

Sunlight filtered gently through the leaves of the forest, sending shafts of warm glowing light into the ThunderClan camp. Bluestripe woke up and was startled at the sight of her kits, then remembered that they were home. Stifling a purr, she crept around her sleeping kits, and out into the cool morning breeze. Padding quietly toward the medicine cat den, where Redflame was resting, she remembered the battle, and the moon of loneliness. She pushed into the den, and

saw Darkspot crouched over Redflame, applying a poultice to the still unhealed wound on the red cat's neck. Darkspot looked up, eyes shining bright with relief. Bluestripe cocked her head to the side, wondering what the medicine cat was thinking.

"I-is everything okay?" she mewed worriedly.

"He should be up and moving within a quarter moon, and can go back to his duties in a half moon."

"Are you sure?" Darkspot nodded. He turned and went to the back of the den. Bluestripe padded up to Redflame, and started grooming his matted dirty fur.

A few days later, Stormstar leapt onto Highrock.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting." he waited for his clan to gather.

"It is time for ThunderClan to welcome three new warriors, and three new apprentices!" Stormstar yowled. "Patchpaw, Flintpaw, you have both shown you are worthy ThunderClan warriors, fighting diligently and bravely." he gazed at his Clan, and the soon to be warriors.

"I, Stormstar, leader of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices. They have trained hard to learn to ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn." he turned to Flintpaw. "Flintpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and protect your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do!"

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Flintpaw, from this moment you will be known as Flintfang. StarClan honors your swiftness and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan.

"Patchpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and protect your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," Patchpaw meowed solemnly.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Patchpaw, from this moment you will be known as Patchwing. StarClan honors your dedication to your Clan and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

"Acornpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and protect your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," Acornpaw meowed quietly.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Acornpaw, from this moment you will be known as Acornpelt. StarClan honors your quiet thinking, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

"Flintfang! Patchwing! Acornpelt! Flintfang! Patchwing! Acornpelt! Flintfang! Patchwing! Acornpelt!" the cats yowled, Willowtuft the loudest.

"We have one more ceremony today." He beckoned Bluestripe's kits with a flick of his tail.

"Cherrykit, Swallowkit, Drizzlekit, you have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Cherrypaw, Swallowpaw, and Drizzlepaw. I hope your mentors will pass down all they know onto you."

"Duskfeather, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You received excellent training from Laceleaf, and have proven yourself to be strong and loyal. I expect you to pass these on to Cherrypaw." Duskfeather looked surprised to be chosen so soon into her warrior life. She stepped forward to her new apprentice. Stormstar waited for a moment, then continued.

"Beaverpelt, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You received excellent training from Falconwing, and have proven yourself to be a wonderful hunter and diligent in your ways. I expect you to pass these on to Swallowpaw." Beaverpelt stepped forward and touched

noses with his new apprentice. Stormstar continued.

"Scartooth, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You received excellent training from Forestfrost, and have proven yourself to be brave and cunning in your thoughts. I expect you to pass these on to Drizzlepaw." Scartooth blinked happily. Drizzlepaw bounced up to his new mentor, and touched noses with him. All around them, cats congratulated them, chanting their names. Bluestripe licked each of them on the head, and went to the back of the crowd next to her best friend, her favorite cat, and her mate.

"I love you," she whispered. Leaning into his pelt, she heard his deep rumbling purr. She closed her eyes.

"I love you too." he whispered back.

Chapter 35

Darkspot tore off a clump of juniper berries from its bush, placing them into a leaf wrap. Rolling it together, he headed back toward camp, the wind ruffling his fur the wrong way. He glanced up at the sky; a half-moon shone through the hazy sky.

The medicine cat pushed through the bramble tunnel and into his den, dropping the berries on a pile. He heard a sickening rattling noise and the hair on his neck stood on end.

Windpelt stood just outside his den. That had been her breathing. Ears pricked, he lashed his tail in worry.

"Come here," he demanded. "Let me look you over."

The elder looked startled, curling her tail over her back. "I'm fine," she rasped.

"I don't know that yet. I insist, unless you want to join StarClan," Darkspot growled.

Windpelt's eyes became round. "Alright," she agreed, pushing into the den.

Darkspot looked into her runny eyes; crusty discharge circled them. She let out a cough.

The medicine cat's blood ran cold. "Interesting," he mewed, excusing himself from looking so frightened.

"What is it?" the she-cat snapped. "Is it bad?"

"I don't know," he lied, picking up some coltsfoot. "Here, eat this. I need to leave for the half-moon Gathering."

Windpelt dipped her head to lap up the yellow, leafy flowers. "Very

well," she rumbled.

Marshland wet his paws as he passed RiverClan territory. Two cats - one calico and the other an old, grey and white tom, neared him.

"Hello, Hickorywing," Darkspot nodded his head to the she-cat. "Hello, Rushingface."

"Beautiful night," the tom nodded in agreement. "Hurry up before we waste any moonlight, however."

The young she-cat blinked. "It is odd not having Emberfur with you," she admitted softly. "The past two half-moon Gatherings have seemed strangely quiet."

"I agree," Darkspot nodded as they neared ShadowClan territory. A figure stood there; she had been waiting for them.

"Good to see you, Brokenleaf."

The other calico she-cat dipped her head very slightly in acknowledgement. "And you."

At last, after crossing the Thunderpath, two cats joined them. One was a sleek she-cat named Scorchpool and beside her was a young apprentice.

"This is my apprentice," she announced proudly. "His name is Catchpaw."

"Nice to meet you," the grey tabby dipped his head in a mumble.

As they reached Mothermouth, the cats were soon swallowed with darkness; the musty air blocked out Darkspot's sight as he inched toward the cavern where the moonstone was.

Suddenly light flooded the room. Blinking in the bright light that dripped from the roof above, he found a spot beside Rushingface and pressed his muzzle to it, falling into a deep, deep sleep.

The medicine cat found himself in the cavern again, his heart pounding as he wondered if he was asleep. A sweet, herb-tinted

scent filled the air and he spun around.

"Emberfur!"

The tortoiseshell she-cat blinked gently. "Good to see you," she nodded.

"Am I asleep?" he asked timidly.

"Yes, this is a dream," his former mentor agreed. "Now follow me. There is something I must show you, and it will take awhile to get there."

Darkspot's tail twitched and he stepped over the sleeping bodies of his fellow medicine cats. He knew he could not wake them in a dream, but he still had the stabbing worry he would awaken if he did. He felt his paws were as light as air as he passed through the tunnel, feeling as if he was rising into the sky. Then he noticed that indeed he *was*; everything seemed to become the size of mice as he ran through the stars with Emberfur beside him.

"This is incredible," he breathed. He found that running had not taken his breath away. "Is this what it's like being in StarClan?"

"Sometimes," the she-cat laughed. "Quickly now."

They flew over Highstones in a heartbeat, crossing the grassy moors of WindClan as the scent of sleepy rabbit-hunters filled his nose. The wind whipped his ears and whiskers back, but his paws felt no resistance; light as a cloud, he was tearing across the sky.

Scents of the Thunderpath drifted toward him, but he was far too high up to care; soon they were passing RiverClan and slowed down as they reached Treecutplace.

He felt himself falling, but slowly and gently. His paws tingled as they touched fresh grass rarely trod by cats. They leaped delicately over to the edge of Tallpines and entered Twolegplace.

"Why are we here?" Darkspot asked.

But Emberfur said nothing. She led him over a fence; they were not

too far from camp. A clump of particularly sweet-smelling herb grew near one of its corners, but he couldn't place what herb it was.

"What is it?"

Again she remained silent, only blinking at him knowingly.

* * *

What was that herb? Darkspot repeated countless times in his head. He sniffed every herb in his inventory to see if it could spark a memory, but to no avail.

"Darkspot?"

The sound of his name startled him. Scartooth flattened his ears.

"Is this a bad time?" he queried awkwardly. "I just came to tell you I got a thorn in my pad."

"What? No." The medicine cat padded over, his own paws aching from the trek back from Highstones. "Let me see."

Scartooth picked up a hindpaw. "Here," he meowed. "Right in the middle. See it?"

Darkspot nodded, beginning to rhythmically lick the sore pad. After a few moments he took it in his teeth, pulling it out. Scartooth winced.

"No worries," Darkspot purred. "It's out now. Let me get some marigold so it won't get infected."

"Thanks, Darkspot," the warrior told his brother. He paused a moment. "Is something wrong?" he asked.

"I had a dream," Darkspot meowed hastily, digging his nose into his stores. "Nothing important for now."

"Are you going to tell Stormstar?"

The darker cat began to lick the herb into Scartooth's paw. "Yes,

once I interpret it. Tell no one."

Scartooth narrowed his eyes. "Very well," he shrugged.

"There." Darkspot stepped back from him. "You're done. How's Duskfeather? I haven't seen her all day."

"She's out patrolling with Willowtuft, Patchwing, and Drizzlepaw," the warrior explained. "I'm going to go hunting."

Darkspot watched his littermate go, blood roaring in his ears.

Chapter 36

Eaglekit batted at his sister. "You can't catch me, Froststar!" he squealed.

Frostkit fluffed up her fur, unsheathing her tiny claws. "You can't get me either!"

"I'm Alderstar, and I'm going to *eat* you both!" Alderkit jumped up and down, flattening his miniscule ears.

Falconwing looked on in admiration, but Sunstorm saw him glance uneasily back at Bluestripe.

"It's over, Falconwing," she assured him softly. "She has her kits now."

The tom flicked his ears. "I know. But it doesn't feel the same. I am glad that Redflame is back."

"You should be."

A cold breeze fluttered above their heads. They saw the clouds fly by as a sparrow sent out a call.

"I'm going to go hunting," Sunstorm told him. "Tell the kits." She padded over the grass and through the bramble tunnel, wind ruffling her bright fur.

Pale leaf-bare sun cast a shadow on the forest floor. Sunstorm knew there was no real good place to hunt now, and she wandered close to the ShadowClan border to see if perhaps there was a squirrel to snatch.

Suddenly she heard a hoarse, sharp cough from just over the border. Her heart seemed to stop.

"Water," a voice cried, although Sunstorm was unsure where it was coming from.

"Who's there?"

A silver tabby poked her head out of the bushes. "Please," she begged. "It is Quietclaw of ShadowClan. I need your help."

"For what? I serve ThunderClan alone," Sunstorm snapped. But her mother's-heart softened when she saw the pitiful looked in the old cat's eyes.

"I am very ill. I only need water, and—if you can—your medicine cat. I have greencough, child..."

Sunstorm's ears flicked, unsure what she was supposed to do.

"Why are you across the Thunderpath?" she asked wearily.

"That is my Clan's business," Quietclaw rasped. "Please, young warrior."

There was a small pond only a few fox lengths away. There couldn't be any harm in leading an ill cat to drink, could there? *StarClan, please tell me I'm making the right decision*, she prayed silently.

Sunstorm pressed her nose into the tabby's fur. She smelled of sickness indeed, and it worried her—but there was something else, too: the stench of the Thunderpath rubbed all over her pelt. "Come," she ordered.

The senior warrior came to her paws and limped after Sunstorm to the small body of water. Greencough was not to be trifled with, and the younger she-cat kept her distance.

"Do you still need a medicine cat?" Sunstorm ventured awkwardly. Quietclaw, she saw, only nodded.

Darkspot followed after Sunstorm, a leaf-wrap in his jaws. "How far away is she, Sunstorm? Windpelt is very sick and I'm afraid the senior warriors may catch whatever she has." He swallowed a bit as if he was nervous.

"Just past the Thunderpath," she replied hurriedly, quick on her paws.

"The Thunderpath? I don't have time to be serving other Clans that far!" Darkspot stood defiantly.

Sunstorm whipped around, eyes wide. She knew something was wrong. How long had Quietclaw been sick?

"You're a medicine cat, aren't you, mouse-brain?" she yelled. "Your life is dedicated to helping cats *regardless* of your Clan! Or have you forgotten that? Are you a coward, only afraid of losing your patients?" her tail was waving back and forth by now.

Darkspot dropped his leaf bundle on the floor and looked her in the eye. "Who are you to say that to me?" he whispered. "Leave. I will find her on my own."

Sunstorm watched him pick his bundle again and trot off into the shrubbery. She felt embarrassed. He was right—why would she say that?

Light dappled on Sunstorm's pelt. The forest was changing somehow, whether she was aware of it or not. A new dawn. She lay there until the warriors of StarClan shone in the dark brightness, as if they were speaking to her. And suddenly she could forget about whatever illness it was and her quarrel with Darkspot; she was far from camp, but the still night air was comforting.

"Sunstorm."

Sunstorm glanced behind her. A familiar scent tinged the air—one she had smelt recently, yet moons ago.

"Buttonweasel?"

A scruffy, wall-eyed cat padded into the moonlight. But he didn't look old and far-gone like the Buttonweasel Sunstorm had known; his fur was ruffled, but it looked like a young tom with eyes only slightly off, like one that might have been in the glory days of Buttonweasel.

Beside him two other cats came out as well; one Maplestar, and the other a red tom that smelt of ShadowClan. The three cats just blinked, slowly coming closer to her.

Buttonweasel spoke first.

"Look for the Stars," he murmured. "For there will be one of them among you..."

The ShadowClan warrior looked at her with soulful eyes. "Protect her," he whispered.

Suddenly in a gust of wind the StarClan cats faded, and Sunstorm heard a familiar voice behind her.

It was Bluestripe, talking to someone behind her. It was all of Sunstorm's other littermates, and they were all staring at her.

~End of Book One. Look out for the sequel, *The Sign of the Stars*, also by Blue_Sun_Moon~

~If you're interested on reading into other cats' lives in our own version of the special edition novellas, check out *Buttonweasel's Tales* by AGreenwood1, who wrote a lot of the chapters in this book and edited each and every one for your enjoyment. If BT gets a lot of views/votes, she will publish even more.~

Buttonweasel's Tales (Completed: https://www.wattpad.com/story/141980202-buttonweasel%27s-tales-a-warriors-novella-fanfic)

Hickorywing's Prophecy (Ongoing: https://www.wattpad.com/story/143462634-hickorywing%27s-prophecy)